

Finding Your Mystic: Listening Beyond the Voices
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Quote: There is a pervasive form of modern violence to which the idealist...most easily succumbs: activism and overwork. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence. The frenzy of the activist neutralizes his (or her) work... It destroys the fruitfulness of his (or her) work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful. ~ Thomas Merton

I long to be free of the confusion, strife, and negativity of the world.

And I long to be free of the confusion, strife, and negativity in my own mind.

To be free of the “devils on my shoulder.”

You know, the classic image of the wicked imp, whispering temptation into a person’s ear?

Yeah. I have some.

The temptation is real, and at times it makes my life a living hell.

No, it is not tempting me to do really bad things, like steal, or sleep with someone besides my wife, or murder someone.

I’m not saying that such serious temptations NEVER cross my mind; it’s just that I’ve learned how to deal with them. “Oh, I had an awful thought. I can see the attraction, but it’s not something I would ever seriously consider doing. On to other things.”

So those devils only visit from time to time; they don’t live on my shoulder.

No, nowadays there are three main devils that trouble me, that wait for me to be tired or discouraged or out-of-sorts and then peck me until I am ready to die of a thousand cuts.

Their names are Pessimism, Blame, and Shame.

They tempt me into negative assumptions about the world.

Pessimism is the little voice that insists that I must predict the outcome, because if my efforts aren’t going to work anyway, why try? When I argue with pessimism, it can give me ample evidence – especially these days – that there isn’t a hope in hell of a good outcome, or even that I can make any difference at all. And even in areas where I think I can show Pessimism that there may, after all, be a decent chance to make things better, I can’t win with this guy, because it falls back on, “Well, can you *guarantee* that this good outcome will happen?” and then begins with the “what-ifs.”

Then there's Blame. This voice insists that if something bad happens, if something is going wrong, or even if I'm unhappy about something, there must be someone to blame. With just a little prompting, I can get deep into assigning blame, even for things that are really no one's fault. You can't argue with Blame, either; it's either my fault or someone else's, and either way, Blame harms the way I look at myself and others. The feelings stirred up by that little devil harm my relationships, and short-circuit productive problem solving.

And finally, there's Shame. Shame is the feeling that I am not worthy. This devil tells me I have become, or maybe have always been, unworthy of love, unworthy of acceptance, unworthy to live. Its untrue assumption is that I have to do something to earn and keep my worthiness. It is the most toxic of the three, because we are social creatures, and we need to feel loved and accepted in order to survive and thrive. Like anyone, I have my own issues that kick in feelings of deep shame, that feeling that I have stepped into a huge sinkhole with no possible way out. When I am in shame, there is nothing to even argue with. I just feel like I want to die.

I have described these three things – pessimism, blame, and shame – as though they were little devils sitting on my shoulder; but actually, they reside inside my head. This “cast of characters” often keeps me from listening to the deeper, but quieter voices that call me to life, to love, to living into my gifts, to the deeper truth that no matter the flaws in myself and the world, what I do matters, and I do make a difference, every day.

Arguing with those voices can be exhausting and counterproductive. Trying to outrun them or drown them out with activity, trying to be of service as much as possible in a world that feels like it's on fire, only leaves me feeling guilty or inadequate because I cannot do more.

Don't get me wrong; I do feel like I need to try to be of service as much as possible. But jumping into service without taking time to listen to my deep inner promptings is not life-giving for myself or others, and it is not sustainable. As Thomas Merton says, it is a frenzy that is a form of violence, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful. Without the inner wisdom in the chairperson's seat, guess who is going to be running the show, without me even noticing? Yep. Those guys, my little devils.

Environmental scientists tell us that when an ecosystem has been damaged — say, from logging, overgrazing, or chemical-dependent mono-crop agriculture — and then you leave it alone, invasive species typically show up and take over. If you then attempt to simply suppress or eliminate the invasives — whether through pesticide application or heroic weeding — you're not strengthening the ecosystem, but rather merely suppressing a symptom called “weeds.” In contrast, if you tend the health of the ecosystem — for example, by improving soil quality or planting native species — the invasives find a less suitable landing site and the ecosystem is more quickly restored to its natural and mature wholeness.

So, what if we stopped spending so much effort on weeding out our destructive thoughts and feelings? What if we stopped trying to silence them, what if we stopped arguing with them? What if we let them in and took note of what they are saying, without feeling we have to satisfy or convince them, but also without feeling we have to allow their messages to hurt or convince us?

What if we then said, “OK, and now let’s hear from Inner Wisdom? And let’s let Love have a turn to speak. Don’t forget to let my True Beliefs express themselves, and remind me that everyone has worth and is worthy, and the web of all existence holds and sustains me in all I do, and doing right matters, no matter the outcome. We’re all in this together.”

How might that more balanced view inform our decision-making process?

Jon Kabat-Zinn, creator of the Stress Reduction Clinic and the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, is famous for developing a technique called Mindful Yoga. He has had significant success helping many patients cope with stress, pain, and illness by using what he calls “moment-to-moment awareness.” He advises us to listen more carefully to ourselves, and to trust what we hear.

“People think that meditation is a way to shut off the pressures of the world or of your own mind,” Kabat-Zin wrote in his book, *Wherever You Go, There You Are*, “but that is an inaccurate impression. Meditation is neither shutting things out or off. It is seeing things clearly, and deliberately positioning yourself in relationship to them. The spirit of mindfulness practice was nicely captured in a poster of 70-ish yogi, Swami Satchita-nanda, in full white beard and flowing robes atop a surfboard riding the waves off a Hawaiian beach. The caption read, ‘You can’t stop the waves, but you can learn to surf.’”

I love that visual, surfing the waves of adversity and change. There are times when it really resonates with me. But there are also times when I don’t have the energy to surf, and also times when those waves are threatening to become a tsunami and I know better than to wade out and “catch a wave.” I’d be under water, rather than “sittin’ on top of the world” in the words of the old Beach Boys song.

For those times, Jon Kabat-Zin has this advice: “Another way to look at meditation is to view thinking itself as a waterfall, a cascading of thought. In cultivating mindfulness, we are going beyond or behind our thinking, much the way you might find a vantage point in a cave or depression in the rock behind a waterfall. We still see and hear the water, but we are out of the torrent.”

In this position, we can gain some needed rest from dealing with all that negativity. We can also attend to some of that inner work, the work that needs to be done at all stages of life, around what’s life-giving and what’s death-dealing as we try to respond to the needs and calls of the world, whether those needs are personal, or in our family or community, or nationally, or globally.

From this vantage point, we can pause and ask, “Am I trying/wanting to meet the needs of the world that I don’t have the gifts to meet? How do I know what gifts I have? Do I have the gift to offer anything to that particular need?” Even if it is an urgent need, there is no doubt someone who is gifted to do that, if I am not. I do not have to fill every need. I don’t have to do this alone.

We can also ask, “What do I need to do to take care of myself so that my impact on other people is life-giving?” I don’t want my decisions to become driven by fear, pessimism, blame

and shame, but by Love, and Joy, and that still quiet voice of Inner Wisdom, that inner mystic whose perspective is waiting to be heard.

When we tend the well-being of our human psyches — by improving our social and ecological “soil” and cultivating the “native species” of the Self — there is less opportunity for the fragmented or wounded elements of our psyches to take over; our psychological “space” is already occupied by the facets of a more fully flourishing being. We’ve placed the emphasis on promoting health and wholeness rather than on (merely) suppressing the things that are problematic.

This means making some time and space to explore our own depths, to discover those strong, true, loving parts of ourselves that have the strength and courage and vision and love to catch the wave and surf.

"In a world of noise, confusion and conflict it is necessary that there be places of silence, inner discipline and peace. In such places love can blossom," says Thomas Merton

To live a life of balance, we must make a practice of listening beyond the strident voices of negativity and return to our quiet center. It is not a luxury. Like food and sleep, we need it each and every day. It is so simple, and yet it is not easy.

Susan Manker-Seale says, “It’s something I learn and re-learn. Start the day with a bit of poetry, a deep breath, a meditation, a gentleness with myself if I forget.”

I leave you with her “Poem for Thursday”:

Dove calls through busy morning walls
The dove calls
She calls
And silence fills my mind
Hush!
The dove calls.

(“Balance” by Susan Manker-Seale, in *Everyday Spiritual Practice*)

May we listen for the dove, and follow.