

Becoming A Nature Listener

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You have probably heard that our brains filter out much of the sensory stimulation we receive. This keeps us from falling into information overload but it also means that we, humans, miss a lot of what is going on.

Colorado State professor, Temple Grandin, points out in her book, Animals in Translation, that at the cellular level, both humans and animals have essentially the same brain cells. We humans just use our neurons differently. But that is not true for all of us. For example, Grandin describes a dyslexic student, Holly, who “has such acute auditory perception that she can actually hear radios that aren’t turned on. . . She’ll say, ‘NPR is doing a show on lions,’ and we’ll turn the radio on and sure enough NPR is doing a show on lions. Holly can hear it. She can hear the hum of electric wires in the wall. . . I think the potential to be able to hear the radio when it’s turned off is already there inside everyone’s brains; we just can’t access it. Somehow a person with sensory problems (like Holly) figures out how to get to it.”

In a related vein, Neurologist, Dr. Oliver Sacks (author of The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat) describes the case of a medical student who dreamed one night that he was a dog and then woke up with his capacities of sensory perception, especially smell, dramatically heightened. For example, he could recognize all the streets and shops in New York by smell and when he did his hospital rounds he was able to recognize all twenty of his patients simply by smell; he could even smell their emotions.

And consider this: Dr. Larry Dossey (author of The Extraordinary Healing Power of Ordinary Things) reports that local healers in Madagascar, when asked how they know which of the some 15,000 species of native plants is the best for treating a certain disease, reply that they wait for the plants to tell them. In practice, they walk about in the forest with an open mind, humbly asking the plants for assistance. Eventually, a certain plant captures their attention—in effect, calling out to greet them—declaring itself to be the proper remedy. Although this seems bizarre from a Western scientific perspective, many of these indigenous practitioners are successful healers.

Some noteworthy Western scientists also owe their success, in part, to their capacity to listen to the denizens of the plant world. For example, Barbara McClintock, Nobel Prize recipient for her discovery that bits of genes in corn plants actually “jump” from place to place along chromosomes, did not hold her beloved corn plants at a distance—rather she was in relationship with them. Her biographer Evelyn Fox Keller relates that “Over and over again [McClintock] tells us one must have the time to look, the patience to hear what the material has to say to you,” and the openness to “let it come to you.” Above all, one must have “a feeling for the organism.” McClintock, in her relation to corn plants, achieved “the highest form of love, love that allows for intimacy without the annihilation of difference.”

I am especially intrigued by McClintock’s story. It awakens my deep longing to experience life as fully as possible—not simply as an autonomous individual striving single-mindedly for worldly success, but as a flesh-and-blood, vulnerable and awake, subject in the community of life.

I realize that right here in Centre County is it possible for each us, like McClintock, to be in genuine relationship with the wild plants and animals that we live among. For example, rather than being largely oblivious to the sounds of birds on these

summer mornings, we can really stop and pay attention, recognizing that what we are really hearing are voices! Though the sounds aren't words that we can understand, we are witnessing a form of meaningful *speech*. By simply acknowledging this, our capacity to hear the world will expand and deepen.

We can wake up all our senses by pausing to remember that everything on this glorious planet is alive; everything moves! Some things like rocks, move more slowly, but everything has its movement and, as such, everything has the potential to *move* us, provided we are open to relationship.

I was reminded of this recently when I encountered a box turtle while hiking in Black Moshanon Park. I sat beside this sweet being for an hour to watch and listen. For that entire time, the turtle stood motionless, head fully extended and eyes wide open. There we were—the two of us—Man and Turtle: Both animals and each unique in our own way!

I can't speak for Turtle but I know that during our encounter I was experiencing a heightened sense of alertness, humility and kinship which is say that I felt more awake and fully alive than usual.

It was deliciously ironic for me to discover through this encounter that I might come more fully alive, **not** by rushing around packing my days chock full of activities, but, instead, through the simple act of slowing down. In so doing I give myself the chance to see with new eyes and hear with fresh ears. What better time for this than summer!