

The Art of Listening

I was looking forward to my conversation with Dr. Johnson, an affable and attentive man in his sixties who had just retired from a long and successful practice as a physician. A freshman in chiropractic college, I had many questions for the doctor which I wrote down and brought to our meeting on a folded piece of paper. When I arrived at his home, he graciously invited me in, offered me a cup of tea and met my excitement, curiosity and questions with interest and respect. When I was done speaking he paused, and then offered me guidance that has served as a ballast throughout the changing tides of my thirty years in practice.

Dr. Johnson shared with me the concerns he had about medicine's increasing reliance on technology, tests and drug therapy. In his day physicians relied on intelligence, skill and judicious testing to come up with a diagnosis.

"Listen to the patient," he told me, "and you will find out all you need to know." It was not easy advice for me to follow, since I have a passion for telling stories and engaging in conversation. And yet my willingness to listen and be attentive has been the most valuable tool in my practice.

This art of listening has formed the foundation of healing practices for thousands of years. Listening is broader than receiving answers to questions about symptoms, family history and the like. J.R. Worsley, who brought Five Element Acupuncture to the West, speaks of this expansive way of listening :

"Whenever any organ in your body imbalances, the color shows in your face, an odor is emitted from your body, the sound of your voice becomes inappropriate, and your emotions become inappropriate. So there are four classic ways where the body-mind-spirit is saying something's wrong: color, sound, odor and emotion."

The sense of touch is also essential to understanding what's going on. Palpation of tissues, cranial rhythms and pulses are ways of receiving information directly from the body. We can also observe the breath and listen to digestive sounds as indicators of relaxation and nerve flow.

To become skilled in these methods of observation takes years of practice, but there are things we can all do to benefit the process. We can develop our own art of listening. How do I know that I'm sad, or in pain? I know because I'm paying attention. To the degree that I become close to my sadness or pain or whatever arises I develop the skills to know it more intimately. Then the sadness or pain teaches me something that opens the possibility for remarkable and positive change that I could not have imagined otherwise. As Francis Weller, the author of *The Wild Edge of Sorrow* says "When we approach our

inner life with reverence, something great will approach us."

Another key to healing exists in the observation of Nature. The relationships between birds, animals, plants, rivers and the sun give us invaluable information about how we function as humans. In the words of Dr. Worsley, "we are able to get the balance (within us) which nature gets outside."

Winter is the perfect season to practice the art of listening because it is a time of stillness and quietude, as we can easily see in nature where things are taken down to their bare essence. It is a time to rest and replenish ourselves in preparation for the spring. In winter we are called to self-reflection and self-compassion, to go inward as nature does. Go to bed early and sleep late. Conserve your energy, eat warming foods, and make sure to stay warm. And enjoy the gift of this season by deeply listening to the voice within you. Its whisper has something important to say.

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