

A Time to Listen

William Ayot Re-connects in Sámiland

Last April, I underwent a deep and powerful Sámi ritual in the far north of Sweden, and the experience has stayed with me. It wasn't just the multi-coloured variety of lichens coating every tree and rock, nor the diamond droplets of melt-water dripping from the circle of pines above me, nor even the eagles circling above them, and the ravens calling as one of my Sámi hosts 'joiked' her wordless song of healing. No, what stayed with me was the deep and comforting silence I experienced amongst these people; that and a piece of wisdom handed down from a noide, a Sámi shaman, to my Swedish friends and passed on to me as I headed home... And the message of the noide was simple - we need to listen.

If we can listen in what the Quakers call companionable silence. If we can bring ourselves to a place of open, non-judgmental silence, we can begin to absorb: to learn, to grow, and even to heal in ways denied to us for hundreds of years.

The Sámi believe that every animal and bird, every rock and tree, has not only its own language, but a valuable message to give us. For our part, our ceaseless chatter and obsessive thinking blocks out both inner silences, and outer conversations, cutting us off from the wisdom available. Unlike us, the Sámi's listening puts them in touch with their environment, their people, and themselves. It also helps them to heal.

On the other side of the earth, the Ngangiwumirr elder, Miriam Rose Ungunmerr Bauman has begun speaking of 'Dadirri', the deep spring of inner listening and contemplation within us all – the inexhaustible spring of compassionate silence that calls to us. This sophisticated practice, common to many peoples of the outback, has been used to cultivate wisdom and provide deep psychological healing for millennia. There's nothing new about trauma and indigenous peoples from Uluru to the Arctic Circle have variously formed silent empathic circles to heal their returning warriors, their lost and their bewildered.

We've spent the last few centuries denigrating the sacred technologies of the indigenous world but lately – aware that our way of life is hurtful as well as unsustainable – we have begun to turn back to see what skills we might have discarded on the way to progress, dominion and unhappiness. Perhaps the greatest of these simple skills is listening.

Slowly it has dawned on me that it's a matter of horses for courses, and that listening is a brilliant alternative way to re-connection and wholeness. I've never been a great meditator, for instance. My restless body and overactive mind has always come away from the sesshin or the meditation hall frustrated and somehow disconnected. But the practice of listening, of simply being present and paying attention, is the most natural thing in the world to me. As a child I spent whole days on my own, wandering in nature, watching and... yes... listening – taking in what was happening around me. This included the song of the wren and the skylark above her, the rustle of the bushes and the twitch of deer in the woods, the whole, unending conversation of life. In our frantic world with its hustle and bustle we've learned to block out sound, and in doing so we've lost a vital path to wholeness. As I sit here, remembering the eagles and the silence of Sámiland, I know that I for one need to get back to that.

William Ayot