

The Transformational Potential of Recalibrating an Ability to Listen

Reflection Essay - Liam M. Hooper, MDiv; 2024



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“How can we listen across species, across extinction, across harm? ... I am humbly listening and I am learning to take responsibility for my frequencies. I can lower them to reach you. I can reflect before I speak out...I can hear what I cannot see yet. I can make a whole world of resonance.”

Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals* (pp 15, 18)

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The other day, on my way into the house after a quiet time on the porch, I heard the unmistakable sounds of fluttering wings. Just behind me, eastward, over my right shoulder—the briefest of soft, settling sounds. As I lingered outside the door, the winded whispers ceased, and I turned my gaze toward the hawthorn tree at the corner of the porch screen, expecting to see a crow or a feisty blue jay.

There, nestled within the spread of winter limbs, a hawk perched on an inner, bare and thorny branch. With only the screen and about ten feet between us, I could easily see it was a red-tailed hawk. As soundlessly as possible, I made my way toward the hawthorn, hoping to watch more closely without startling my visitor.

Unbothered, the hawk remained. Shielding my eyes from the brightening morning sun, I quietly watched this visitor who, much to my surprise, was also regarding me. Soon enough, my companion’s attention turned to other happenings, drifted back to me again, then returned to the waking world around us. We passed some moments together like this, the hawk and I—basking in sunlight as it filled the dawning day, noting living things stirring in our surroundings, and attending one another’s presence watchfully. Then, after a few seconds of shared attention, as gracefully as it had landed in the hawthorn, my hawk-friend flew away.

This experience is not unusual—although passing the time with a hawk is less common than is a collection of moments in the presence of crows, cardinals, blue jays, sparrows, various kinds of finches, wrens, and Carolina chickadees.

Every morning, I engage a longstanding practice of spending some moments in quietude, watchfully abiding on our screened porch. No matter the weather, I begin with only a cup of coffee and an intention to settle into my body and the still-continual surprise of living-on by taking time to bear witness and listen to expressions of life, everywhere. And, frequently throughout each day—especially, when I have a need to recollect myself—I return to the outdoors, holding time on the porch, walking around the yard, or sitting alone on the little deck outside my woodworking shop. Whether I do this for two or three minutes, a half-hour, or much longer, the time set aside is its own



sufficiency—a measure of quality and, surely, purpose.

I don't do this because I think it will magically make a wiser, more evolved person—although there is certainly much to learn by watching and listening. Nor do I spend time in nature because some self-help book promised it decreases stress or a pop-spirituality guru convinced me it will suddenly lead to spiritual enlightenment. Yet, it is true this abiding practice, however brief it may be, is a significant aspect of my own evolving spirituality.

I do it because, in some fundamental way, it is who I am. As far back as I can remember, I have been inclined toward seeking respite in the other-than-human world. I seem to need the experience of nature to ground me, clear my head of an all-too-regular chatter, nurture my curiosity, and restore a sense of connection and belonging to something bigger than myself. This, after too many long years of feeling sure I didn't fit in or belong anywhere, including my own body. And while there is a lot I don't know, I do know that more than once, this practice of immersing myself in creation, watching and listening—even, daydreaming—as frequently and regularly as possible, has saved my life. But that is another story altogether, for another time.

Nonetheless, my visit with the hawk offered a reminder that these moments are not only life-sustaining for me; they are palpable expressions of the extraordinary present in the ordinary, the miraculous dwelling in the mundane. Whether I take time to notice or not, everything arises within and is imbued with an infinite, elegant web of extraordinary ordinariness and mysterious particularity—including us, and surely too, chattering crows, trees, mosses, running squirrels, presumably quieter fungi and bacteria, and red-tailed hawks, cohabitating in a world of beings.

The notable thing about my backyard experiences is that I do not live in the country. Our neighborhood, once a small rural-leaning suburb outside of the town proper, is now at the well-traveled edge of this small-but-expanding city and our more rustic surroundings. Throughout the course of a day, there is a continuous, low level hum of traffic, lawnmowers and leaf blowers, dogs barking, people talking and coming and going, workers sawing and hammering, all amid countless other commingling noises—and all, a seemingly ceaseless, backgrounded din of human activity.

Still, in the evenings, deer rustle grasses and leaves as they pass through the yard. Nocturnal o'possums travel tree limbs, feeding. And throughout each day, sunrise to moonrise, birds abound in community with squirrels, rabbits, chipmunks, occasional foxes, and other curious creatures. To hear any sounds they might make, I have to listen intentionally, and carefully.

My point is this: if a regular practice of being outside had not trained me, at first unconsciously, to a particular kind of listening and intentional watchfulness, I likely would have missed the hawk. The bird's brief, nearly soundless fluttering was unmistakable to me because years of regular, intentional time with the natural world has attuned my hearing to particular perceptions. It has become a kind of second nature for me to perceive vibrations, whispers, and resonations going on beneath the noises of the human world—when, that is, I orient my attention toward receptivity.

When I remember to quiet myself, listen and watch, the other-than-human world instructs me in a whole host of other languages, behaviors, and embodied ways of being. Wherever I am, plants and



flowering things, trees, mosses, rocks, fossils, rivers, seas, and all manner of non-human-beings can become not only companions of a kind, but also teachers. When I am open to them, these other-than-human beings teach me—often subtly, sometimes with starker immediacy—lessons about myself, about life among other humans, and somewhat miraculously, about my own trans-queer-ish place in the world.

Nature breathes continual testimonies, conveying indisputable evidence that both a continually emerging, broadly differentiated evolution and individual particularity are equally bound up together and necessary to life on earth. Everywhere, everything points to the primacy of diversity and the vitality of particularity within that diversity.

What I mean to say is that the practice of sitting in nature teaches me about the interconnected, interdependent kinship nature, amid diverse individuation, that is intrinsic to everything—especially, the ever emerging nature of being and becoming, writ large; of bodiedness, selfhood, relationality, and surely, the multidimensional nature of human beingness. Along the daily journey, I am also finding that listening to life around me almost subliminally increases an ability to continue learning to listen to myself, which seems somehow needful to an ongoing experience of learning to be relational with others.

Said another way, attuning to the natural world is slowly and steadily teaching me about *forms*, or *ways*, of listening—especially, about external and internal levels of listening, and surely, about the interconnectedness within these ways of attuning to self and world. Following my curious fascination into all sorts of inquiry, study, and observation, I have learned some interesting, seemingly related things about perceptive capacities.

There are, in fact, many internal and external systems of sensation and perception. Within these, multiple senses and intricate, complex sensory systems perform various, interconnected functions. Exteroception, for example, is the perception—through exteroceptors—of external stimuli normatively detected by the senses of vision, hearing, smell, taste, temperature, and touch, which includes phenomena like force and pressure.

Interoception, or the sixth sense—as it is often called—is the interwebbing, whole-body system of sensing and receiving internal signals, preconscious and conscious interpretations of those stimuli, and the myriad integrated, embodied responses necessary for maintaining homeostasis, memory processing and learning, threat perception, and more mysterious phenomena such as intuition, *deja vu*-like sensations, and an ever-present, organized, developmental sense of self. Functionally, interoception is an internalized communication loop—involving the central nervous system (brain and spinal cord), peripheral nervous system, the musculoskeletal system, and the body's many organs, especially, the visceral organs—which processes extra-sensory phenomena as essential to consciousness and sense of self as these communications are to regulating and maintaining vital functions like heart rate.

Through a somewhat miraculous interplay between unconscious and conscious exchanges, and automatic and volitional responses, exteroceptive and interoceptive processes work together, listening to and communicating within and across systems, to perform and regulate specialized



functions—all the while, manifesting the interconnectedness of everything within and beyond our bodies. An excellent example of this fundamental integration of systems is proprioception, which is perception of where the body is in space (position) and what it is doing in relation to everything else (orientation).

In one of the many marvels of embodiment, proprioception makes it possible to know *where our bodies are in space* and, ultimately, to know *where we, as selves, are in our bodies*. Like other forms of sensation and perception, proprioception includes other wonderfully integrated abilities. For example, the vestibular sense maintains balance and equilibrium in relation to gravity and the environment, keeping our feet on the ground, even when our minds wander off into the clouds.

Kinesthesia, another aspect of proprioception, is a specialized faculty that senses the position and movement of the body through receptors in muscles, tendons, and joints. Together, integrating a vast array of information from multiple sensory sources, these perceptive capacities allow for the ability to detect, monitor, regulate, and consciously control body movements with remarkable efficiency, precision, elegance, and diversity of abilities.

Although these various systems have been given names that might imply separation, they are (like everything else) interconnected and integrated, rather than separate, discrete faculties. Moreover, each system relies on and represents dynamic, multivalent forms of relational communication. It could be said that every aspect of existence is fundamentally, and elementally formed by relationships and that there are multitudinous—likely, infinite—kinds of relationships. Even within our bodies. Likewise, within these relational forces, there are many and various ways of listening and bearing witness.

The earth moves and the body attunes to that vibratory music and grounds itself. The world around us teems with signs and signals and the body watches and hears, consciously and unconsciously. Internally, the body—entire engages in multiple kinds of listening and conversing—sensing, processing, communicating, and responding to all manner of internal and external signals, other bodies and beings, and to the worlds the body inhabits. Doubtless the emergence of these embodied abilities would be remarkable enough in human beings and our distant ancestors, but the truth is that none of these ingenious faculties are unique to homo sapiens.

Everything, everywhere—everything that exists—communes and communicates. Particles, atoms, molecules, compounds, cells, tissue, and organs. Galaxies, stars, solar systems, and the stuff that constitutes them. Indeed, in his theory of spacetime, Einstein proposed that space and time are alive with vibrations, which of course not only implies interrelationality, but also means the cosmos does indeed make music, whether we are able to “hear” those sounds or not.

Our lack of hearing, however, does not necessitate that these sounds do not have other listeners, unknown to us. Our limited range of frequency detection in no way means there are no other frequencies, other vibrations, other utterances, and even music that we might, some day, learn to hear.

In 2006, writing for *American Scientist*, Craig Hogan noted that research is proving Einstein was



correct, that “space and time carry a cacophony of vibrations with textures and timbres as rich and varied as the din of sounds in a tropical rain forest or the finale of a Wagner opera,” and scientists are investigating ways to listen and make those sounds accessible to humans.

In a 2023 article for *Smithsonian Magazine*, Will Sullivan reported on a collaboration between the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and composer Sophie Kastner. Building on earlier work by Kimberly Arcand and her team in 2021, Kastner and collaborators translated astronomical data into a piece of music, titled *Where Parallel Lines Converge*.

Likewise, here on earth, spider webs represent a known source of other sounds inaudible to humans, yet translatable to audible ranges. As Alex Fox noted in a 2021 article for *Smithsonian Magazine*, spiders have poor vision and live in a webbed world made of vibratory strings. They sense their world through the different frequencies emitted by those vibrations—all of which can be converted into a short range of frequencies, allowing humans to hear the music of the webs. Similarly, dogs, elephants, and a whole host of other creatures are known to hear frequencies beyond the range available to humans.

It is equally true that there are multitudinous modes of hearing beyond strictly auditory sensations, and certainly beyond those available to human beings. Snakes, for example, “hear” vibrations in the ground through the stapes on their lower jaw bones. That is, they literally hear in their bones, a process known as bone conduction. There is evidence that snakes may also have well developed hearing in their inner ears despite the absence of ear drums.

Interestingly, contrary to conventional understandings of human hearing, a similar snake-like process of vibratory perception may be at work in human beings—far below our conscious awareness. In a 2022 article for *Popular Mechanics*, Ashley Stimpson reported findings of a research study into human perception of low frequency vibrations and the potential effects of these on the motor system, balance, and rhythm, as well as motivation to move. The study by researchers at McMaster University in Canada was conducted on concertgoers using low, bass frequencies, which the inner ear perceives as inaudible vibrations.

In their study, these scientists found that participants’ inspiration to move their bodies and dance to the audible concert music *increased by 12 percent* when speakers emitting very low (bass) frequencies were activated. Given that these frequencies are inaudible, the impulse to move was not a conscious decision. Participants were feeling the bass frequencies as vibrations through their skin and inner ears. Like snakes. It would seem that something within the evolutionarily ancient, reptilian parts of our brains compels us to move when we sense the resonating vibrations and rhythms of earth and body.

On another level of evolutionary marvels, bats and many marine mammals possess such sensitized hearing that they can detect frequencies beyond the perceptive abilities of many species. In conjunction with this finely developed hearing, they make use of a specialized attunement to high-frequency sounds—known as echolocation—to enhance awareness of their surroundings, enabling them to see beyond what their eyes can perceive. In short, by emitting sounds and reading the sound waves reflected back to them, they see what they *hear*.



There are, it seems, multiple ways of listening and hearing, and surely too, equally numerous ways of seeing and watching. It seems possible, at least, that there are things we humans—limited as we are—might learn from these many forms of communication and perception. Maybe, there are even practical applications we can emulate.

Regardless, and importantly, I am gradually learning that recalibrating my ability to perceive, hear, and to see by attending to the natural world around me—accessing a range of senses—can be translated into practices I can engage with other people. It seems possible that, if I practice seeing and listening to people with the same intentional receptivity I give to the natural world, I can cultivate an ability to hear and see others with care, curiosity, and courage. If and when, that is, I am willing to engage the practice beyond the comfort of my own backyard.

I think this kind of listening, watching, reflecting, and learning, as a practice—which I have stumbled on mostly by happenstance—is the kind of bearing witness to ourselves, one another, and the world we inhabit that is necessary to creating truly meaningful relational connections, individually and collectively. Such a practice is, by nature, transformational. I suspect, too, that this transformative listening, witness bearing, and learning about ourselves and one another is requisite to any collective change-making work that achieves some level of measurable justice.

In her book *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*, Alexis Pauline Gumbs goes so far as to say that listening to other beings—including other human persons—to hear what cannot yet be seen, to apprentice, and to learn “beyond the normative ability to hear” is “a transformative and revolutionary resource that requires quieting down and tuning in” (p 15).

Through such listening and witnessing apprenticeships, Gumbs suggests, we might learn how to “listen across species, across extinction, across harm” in ways that teach us how to work together to transform life on planet earth for the good of all of us.

Stumbling onto my own apprenticeship practices as I have and gleaning formative teachings here and there along the way, I am inclined to agree with Gumbs. But more, I am also convinced that cultivating a practice of courageous, deep listening and witness-bearing with one another is, likely, the only sure path to fostering the insight-bearing, compassion-inspiring relationships necessary for achieving any sort of measurable progress toward saving ourselves and our planet. To be sure, working for a better world for all, rather than some, of us is a collective project.

As Indigenous elder Steven Charleston teaches “community is how we respond to injustice.” In his book *Ladder to the Light: An Indigenous Elder’s Meditations on Hope and Courage*, Charleston expands this assertion. Work for social change, he notes, is not motivated by political correctness but by “an awareness that when one suffers, we all suffer” (p 83). In my experience, we come to understand the suffering of others and appreciate that their wellbeing is connected to our own when we are able to listen deeply and bear witness intently enough to recognize glimpses of our own humanity in the personhood of another human being with whom we perceive we have nothing in common.

Thinking about all this enlivens and motivates a continued curiosity about methods and practices for learning to listen to others, to the world around me, and to myself more deliberately and



courageously, with hope of reaching a fullness of hearing that fosters deeper understanding. Likewise, as a listening apprentice, I am interested in continuing to discover the webby, vibratory interconnectedness between listening and bearing witness. And I wonder what is possible.

Can learning to listen for the soft, subtle movements of a hawk landing lightly on a bare, winter branch teach me to hear what cannot yet be seen in others? In myself? Can I learn to quiet myself and recalibrate my senses to cultivate a spidery attunement to frequencies beyond my own? Is it possible to cultivate a snake-like sensitivity to changes in the vibrations among and between us and the worlds we inhabit in ways that teach me to be more understanding of, and more compassionate with, others and myself?

Equally, can cultivating a capacity for more deliberate, deeper listening increase my ability to see—to witness—others, myself, and the conditions that impact our lives with greater curiosity, courage, understanding, and clarity? That is, can increased capacity for hearing likewise improve the ability to recognize and see things that were before unknown?

Certainly, my experiences with attending to the natural world suggest that such learning is possible. That is, one's senses *can* be recalibrated in somewhat ancillary ways through seemingly unrelated, perhaps random practices, such as spending time outside; sitting in silence, listening for birdsong; or listening to music, among others. Given this, then surely the capacity for watching and listening more deeply and deliberately *can be learned intentionally through practices undertaken for the sole purposes of attuning hearing and focusing vision* toward curiosity about lives beyond our own, seeking courageously to understand diverse experiences, and nurturing compassionate regard for the humanity of other persons.

It seems that a group of people, so inclined, could discern and develop intentional methods and practices for learning and growing in commune together. If nothing else, I am daring to believe such collective learning is possible—that a gathering of daring individuals can come together, form a circle, and learn to lower our frequencies, synchronize and attune our internal and external powers of perception, and slow our breathing to reach and receive one another deliberately enough to discover the ways that we, and our wellbeing, are bound together.

Perhaps, not. I do not know for sure. But, I am curious enough to keep listening to and watching the world around me—learning to hear and witness what emerges. Maybe, I will even be inspired to make a circle in my backyard and invite people who are also curious about such things to join me.



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