Watching Deeply, Listening Intently

Reflection Essay - Liam M. Hooper, MDiv; 2024

"Darwin was right; pieces of creation can be destroyed." ... "Can the whole forest be seen through a small contemplative window of leaves, rocks, and water?"

David George Haskell, *The Forest Unseen: A Year's Watch in Nature* (p 33, xii)

"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)

For many years during my childhood, my maternal grandparents lived in Arizona. At least once a year, we used dad's vacation time for extended visits with them at their home in Pine, a small town nestled low at the base of Strawberry Mountain. Grandma, who had been a nurse's aid during and after the war, was a seamstress and grandpa was a contractor. Of course, like all of us, they were so much more than these occupations. By nature and interest, both of them were also amateur geologists of a sort.

And so, on every vacation, we traveled around Arizona, exploring dried creek beds, swaths of open desert, rhyolitic obsidian (or, commonly, Apache tear) caves, and all manner of wondrous environments searching for minerals, gemstones, fossils, and other notable earth-bound finds. Not only did I catch rockhounding fever, as grandma often called it (and from which I've never recovered), the experiences, lessons, and marvels of the natural world discoverable through practiced attention were deeply formative for me.

Those visits were wonder-filled, time-suspended moments upon moments of discovery, inquiry, learning, and joy—a world of nature, hidden histories, and artifacts, rooted in earth and stone, bound together and rising from soil to sun, like prayers. Like the skyward-reaching Ponderosa pines. Alongside my grandparents, earth-bound legacies, minerals and other artifacts, animals, lizards, birds, plants, and trees were my teachers. And although for most of my growing up I lacked adequate language to describe it, I recognize that I have long held a yearning for, and been in search of, a kind of abiding—a way of being, watching, and listening—that reaches across and beyond merely seeing and hearing the world and its inhabitants.

From an early age, I was content to go by myself into the woods. I could spend hours stretched out on a bed of moss, sitting nestled as high as I could climb in a welcoming tree, or wandering remnants of forest unsullied by builders, watching and listening, taking note, making discoveries, and sometimes making drawings. Always, I carried away pocketed traces of time spent exploring

and studying the world around me: tiny bits of moss, rich with dark, clinging soil; thick with deep greens and hints of yellows. Variously colored leaves. Small feathers. Little acorns, conifer cones, rocks, fossils, turtle shells, and other treasures.

While small patches of forest were accessible in the various places we lived, I have always been equally at home in and around water. I was (and still am) content to let a day pass by sitting on the damp, firmer sand, where the sea flows repeatedly into the shore and then recedes—and there, to watch, listen, and ponder the interconnected coexistence of things in that miraculous place where sea life and land life join and ebbing waters reveal mysteries. Likewise, a woodland creek has ever been a fine place to pass the time, gathering evidence of a world teeming everywhere with interdependent life.

Even now, I am prone to wander woodlands and waterways. At home, I remain surrounded by gardens and beloved collections of rocks, minerals, fossils, pieces of driftwood, all sorts of shells, and other collectibles. The most interesting and cherished of these reside in glass jars and small ceramic bowls; others are separated by kind and nestled into wooden cigar boxes and a diversity of lidded display boxes—all of these, housed in narrow curio cabinets and on bookshelves.

Lately, I have thought a lot about my lived experience on our one known earth—a life salted with curiosity about this shared habitation and spare-time preoccupations with searching for evidence of an essential connectedness through all manner of environmental visitations, encounters, and menageries of artifacts. In these rainy winter months, I wander through a mental woodland of ponderings, questions, and revelations these fragile collections inspire. I find myself marveling that the essence of some learnings, encountered in a single day's undertaking, seem to unfold in stages, taking a whole lifetime to fully comprehend. Life, it seems, is like this.

These days, I'm noticeably mindful—perhaps preoccupied—with ever-unfolding evidence of a lesson grandma taught me decades ago, that people are like geodes: we never know how truly beautiful they are or what they are made of until something breaks them open, and the whole of who they are is made bare and glimmering before us. Of course, to notice and surely to learn, one must be curious and watchful. Having more than once borne witness to such kaleidoscopic glimmerings, glintings, and flashings of is-ness, I continue striving to look and listen, seeking to comprehend meaningful revelations present in each, particular breaking-open. And surely, in the willingness to bear the breaking.
It's a lifelong process, this learning to see, hear, and glean—to regard, consider, and to learn. And so, I keep striving to remember to practice.

In these winter days as some things fade away and others remain, I've been pondering what we notice and what goes undiscovered, even when it is right in front of us. I wonder about what we remember and what we forget, especially as so much escapes my own fragile recollection. As well, I'm thinking about what we lose track of and what we preserve—and, surely how and why. Especially, of one another—of the tender relational threads that bind us, one to another.

More and more, it seems to me that life is filled with so many opportunities for learning to listen and to hear, to see and to bear witness—not only the world alive, everywhere; but also to

encounter, see, and listen to others, and especially, to the sensations, intuitions, and perceptions present in the midst of being relationally engaged. I have been especially taken with the relationships between listening and seeing, between witnessing and hearing.

Some months ago, as I attended and cared for my mother in the final weeks of her life, experiencing my own co-occurring perceptions, sensations, and intuitions stirred a lifetime's parceling of ponderings. Keeping watch with her in those last days and hours, learning to listen to the sounds of her steady, increasingly shallow, ever slower breathing, until there was no sound—save the nearly silent measures of my own breaths and the barely discernible drum of my forever-changed, but still beating heart—became for me a kind of contemplation. A teacher. Strangely, hearing seems different now. As if something in me recalibrated, making it easier now to listen closely if I choose to do so, to *feel* the sound of things.

I find myself leaning into listening to things it feels important to apprehend more fully, hearing more intently things perhaps diminished before. Like the quiet sound of leaves resettling as I turn garden soil with a pitchfork, preparing for the next planting. Or the soft, rhythmic scrubs of a fine hand saw through wood. The subtle pops and tiny splashes of dishwashing soap bubbles in the sink, as the kitchen air compresses and bursts soapy air pockets. The symphony of strikes, clanks, and splits as a hammer and chisel shape a piece of wood...or crack open a geode. All of these, never a single sound, but a merging. Perhaps, a recitation. A teaching. Maybe, singing.

More and more, I seem to be interested in learning to practice a kind of listening that accompanies and enhances witnessing, to be more curious about the possibility of recovering the kind of listening and watchfulness learned lying on a moss bed, walking a creek, or sitting high in a tall tree. Too, the slumbering breaths of a loved one. And surely, the breaking open borne in another's dying breaths. I am earnestly curious about what such watchful listening, especially to one another, might reveal—particularly, what might be revealed not only about our world, but about each other and, certainly, ourselves.

That is, I wonder about how learning to recalibrate our listening might enhance our witnessing in ways that lead us into practices of living with one another more intently, kindly, and justly. As Alexis Pauline Gumbs explores in *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*, I am curious about the kinds of listening that might make it possible to learn to hear what cannot yet be seen, what is not yet known. Like Gumbs, particularly, I wonder if and how we can learn to "listen across species, across extinction, across harm" (15).

Is there a special kind of listening involved in bearing witness to another human person, from whatever causes, breaking open before us? Certainly, as my own experience has taught me, living in a body requires a certain kind of inward, self-listening—and doubtless, various kinds of breaking open. Can we invite others to listen with us? Might it be possible to hear the nearly soundless, no less thunderous transformations breaking forth deep within one another? Is there a particular way of witnessing that enables us to listen deeply to a loved one as she dies? Can we learn to witness what seems soundless?

Can such listening help us see and know ourselves, each other, and our conditions more clearly?

More wholly? What might we learn about what it is to be a human being embedded in relational connection and interdependent existence with all other human and non-human beings? What might we learn about ourselves and our shared humanality that can teach us how to recraft our communities toward a common good?

Likewise, does a seed, blanketed in soil and slowly breaking open, utter sounds we can learn to hear? Does a rock whisper lessons as water smooths its skin or shout elemental teachings when another rock, falling, cleaves it open? Do trees struggling to breathe, gasp, and wheeze? Do green, growing things also weep when they are starving? Do they, too, cry when something cleaves them from their roots? Were we to hear such things, what might we learn? Equally, how might we bear witness to what seems soundless in ways that lead us into another kind of hearing? Can watching closely, intentionally, enhance listening and, likewise, might listening illuminate bearing witness?

Recently, an article about Ponderosa pines caught my attention, and brought to my memory gleanings from seemingly soundless trees, especially Arizona cypress, mesquite, desert willow, and certainly, Ponderosa pines. In their *Washington Post* article, "Written in the Wood," Sarah Kaplan and colleagues wrote about dire lessons etched in the rings of Ponderosa pines which have been growing for hundreds of years in Arizona, especially on Mount Bigelow.

Specifically, reading a sample from a particular pine (Bigelow 224 to be precise), scientists noted a testament to exceptional growing conditions in 1856, alongside evidence of everything Bigelow 224 experienced throughout its nearly 200 years of existence. Most concerning, however, was the less than a dozen-cells-wide ring for the 2023 growth year.

In 2023, along with most of the world's human communities, Bigelow 224 experienced the hottest year to date—and possibly, according to European Union scientists, the warmest in the past 125,000 years. Because trees develop their rings in a repetitious cellular now, from birth to death, dendrochronologists can see the effects of climate on living organisms right up to the time a sample is cored. In this way, at least, trees speak. Kaplan and colleagues note that researchers read in this tiny, heat-scorched ring a "silent distress signal."
Ponderosa pines, it seems, speak a grave warning in their woody bodies: that the current trajectory of climate change increasingly imperils not only trees, but all living things. Including us. If there is a widespread dieoff of trees, every oxygen-breathing being eventually dies. If reading tree rings is a kind of listening, what other learnable kinds of listening might be needful to both our survival and, expressly, to our thriving?

While dendrochronologists read (hear, perhaps) lessons and warnings about our collective survival in tree rings, Gumbs engages in a kind of listening to marine mammals—all of whom are equally imperiled. The practice of learning to listen and to hear that Gumbs invites is also a witness-bearing, an intentional way of being present, watching, regarding, considering, and learning. Indeed, she asserts that, more than an ability to hear, listening is "a transformative and revolutionary resource" (15).

In a kind of watchful listening, David George Haskell (*The Forest Unseen: A Year's Watch in Nature*) spent an entire year making regular visits to a singular, one-meter circle of forest which he

partitioned for study in the Cumberland Plateau in Tennessee. Carrying only a magnifying glass, and using the Tibetian mandala as a guiding metaphor, Haskell sought to increase understanding of the whole forest "through a small contemplative window of leaves, rocks, and water" (xii). His descriptions of this year-long watch detail a particular practice—one involving regular, measured, and attentive practices of being present, seeing and, also, of listening.

Of course, both Haskell and Gumbs are concerned with much more than coming to a deeper understanding of our natural world and non-human entities. From land and from water, each is concerned—as am I—with how these practices of witnessing and listening can lead to collectivized practices with one another, in our communities, that guide us toward a way of being in a shared living space where all of us are free. Gumbs describes this project as a process of "undoing a definition of the human, which is so tangled in separation and domination" in ways that, even as we struggle to "survive the extractive and militarized context our species has imposed," help us learn to be accountable to and work with movements that "are boldly seeking to transform the meaning of life on the planet right now" (9).

Toward such a bold and demanding practice, Gumbs asks: "what does it mean to function as a group in a changing environment? How can we organize ourselves intentionally to combat the imbedded isolation of late capitalism" (51)? From watchfulness—surely, a kind of listening—Haskell is interested in watching and understanding the whole forest through how the group of organisms in that square-meter patch of land function and coexist. Ultimately, through contemplation of forest biology, Haskell is asking whether we can come to recognize and better understand the greater whole of our shared human condition—and therefore, one another and ourselves—through the practice of engaging small, contemplative windows of intentional, interpersonal encounters. Framed another way, Haskell too is pondering whether—and how—peering deeply and considering small environmental patches can help us better understand not only the whole of our natural world but also ourselves, our human environments, and our human conditions and, through those teachings, learn to live well together.

Reading Haskell and Gumbs together has deepened my curiosity about the many ways that living in the world is an experiential merging of deep and diverse, potentially transformative teachings, there to be gleaned through watchfulness and listening. This curiosity, likewise, feeds a growing desire for discerning a way of being, thinking, doing, and relating that teaches me practices for deeper listening, witnessing, and abiding. And so, I wonder.

Is there a listening-way through which attuning to the stealthy padding of footsteps in the forest, the rustling of leaves, and subtle changes in the vibration of things to discern what creatures are nearby and where they are coming from that teaches us to listen to others in ways that we learn who they are and where they are coming from? Is there a way of watching a bird sitting atop the thinnest of branches, or a grasshopper effortlessly traversing grassy fields, that teaches us to see what cannot be heard, only witnessed?

Reading Haskell and Gumbs reminded me of the related questions Jaki Shelton Green posed during a virtual community conversation with Friday Fellows in 2020 (Friday Fellowship class 2020-2022; Seminar I). With stirring insightfulness, depth, and sincerity, Green asked the Fellowship class:

How do what we witness and how we witness shape our future? How do we listen each other into being?

It seems to me that Green was calling us into the kinds of listening and watching Gumbs and Haskell are inviting. As I consider the possibility of translating such learning to cultivation of meaningful relational connections, I wonder: is it possible for smalls groups of us human persons to come together, make a circle, and engage in a practice of sharing with, listening to, and witnessing one another in ways that carefully break us, each one, open before one another—like human geodes, sparkling with histories, experiences, promise, wisdoms, and revelations of lessons, travails, sorrows, and joys?

And can we, together in that shared space, learn to receive, speak with, witness, and hear one another into being, into revelation, until there is no sound save the soft symphony of shared measured breaths, nearly imperceptible sighs of expansion, and the steady drum of our forever-changed, still beating hearts?

References

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