

October 2020 Presentation: Audibility

I want to dwell on the importance of audibility, our ability to hear things or catch the tone of things – as distinct from seeing things.

For instance, William Wordsworth begins his poem, which dwells upon his *Recollections of Early Childhood* – as follows:

It is not now as it hath been of yore; / Turn wheresoe'er I may, / By night or day. // The things which I have seen I now can see no more. // The Rainbow comes and goes, / And lovely is the Rose, . . . / But yet I know, where'er I go, / That there hath passed a glory from the earth.

Things which I have seen, he says. His memory gives precedence to *visual* experiences that reflect something deeply real about the world he sensed in infancy.

I'm sure we all have experienced such visual wonder when we were very young. I still recall that day when I must have been only two years old, crawling on the lawn in front of our suburban home, when I had my first close encounter with a buttercup in full bloom. It must have been the first thing in my life that drew me out of my preconscious existence. It was an awakening, causing me even then to pause. What had happened?

I became a conscious human being. I noticed something – as if I were Adam awakening to the Garden of Eden for the first time. It might be described as the birth of my mind within my recently born body. I was on the threshold of imagination, of thought, of thinking, which would slowly take over my being as time went on – with all of its bounty as well as its grief. I had entered a “world” that would expand all around me, loaded with more than a single buttercup. I mean even then amid what Wordsworth called *the splendor in the grass* my gaze also took in a dandelion for the first time – a kind of sunrise as far as I was concerned.

Things audible

But, aside from encountering the *visible* world, what about the world as *audible*, its capacity to be *heard* as much as seen? Philosophers and theologians, modern and from long ago, would not deny that

reality can be audible as well – the world resounding like a chorus out of its apparent silence, if we have ears to hear.

And so I may ask: was I just *viewing, seeing* that simple flower back then in its passivity or was I being drawn into a dialogue. Was the buttercup speaking to me, meant to wake me up in some way – like an alarm clock – enticing me to ask questions of it . . . as advanced scientists seek a *response* from a piece of moon rock or a weather pattern?

Recall that moment in Charles Dickens's story *Dombey and Son* in which the boy Samuel *while convalescing by the seashore one day . . . awoke suddenly from his slumber and listened. His sister Florence asked him what he heard. "I want to know what it says," he answered, looking steadily in her face. "The sea, Floy, what is it that it keeps saying?" She told him that it was only the noise of the rolling waves. "Yes, yes," he said, "But I know that they are always saying something. Always the same thing" . . . He rose up, looking eagerly at the horizon.*

Deafness

Is it only that one's early vision of a buttercup becomes dim, ourselves distracted, as we grow older? Or do we also become deaf to that dialogue we sense with creation and realities beyond? Once again philosophers and theologians of long ago and currently speak of our forgetfulness of what and who and whence and why we are – and whither we are tended. Spectacles (as relentlessly and redundantly displayed before us on TV) and Chatter draw us into a superficial way of being in every direction. The world becomes a screen, a motion picture opposite us – instead of an environment, an embrace, a summons that echoes all around us, envelops us, permeates us as does the air we breathe.

From our infancy we are in the situation of another boy named Samuel in the biblical *Book of Samuel* – asleep in the temple of the priest Eli. And the child was awakened by a call and the text says: *The LORD called to Samuel, who answered, "Here I am." He ran to Eli and said, "Here I am. You called me." "I did not call you," Eli answered. "Go back to sleep." So he went back to sleep. [As we all do.]*

Again the LORD called Samuel, who rose and went to Eli. "Here I am," he said. "You called me." But he answered, "I did not call you, my son. Go back to sleep." The LORD called Samuel again, for the third time . . . Then Eli understood that the LORD was calling the youth. So he said to Samuel, "Go to sleep, and if you are called, reply, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'"

[Then] . . . the LORD came and stood there, calling out as before: Samuel, Samuel! Samuel answered, "Speak, for your servant is listening." The LORD said to Samuel: I am about to do something . . . that will make the ears of everyone who hears it ring.

That short story about Samuel is another way of describing what happened to me upon a lawn in a place called Upper Darby ninety years ago – and happened to you in one way or another, too, before you became too deaf like the rest of us to respond "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

What the waves and buttercups are saying

As a living thing that yellow flower had a story to tell – of how it emerged from a seed into a tiny root and through a fragile stem until it opened up to the light of day. Or did it have an even more fascinating story to tell – or should I say invitation to make - metaphorically: to suggest that like that blossom I too had been born out of a similar process, stage by stage, from not being at all to being the "blossom" I am?

Something soon forgotten - as I emerge further into the everyday world around me – that I have indeed emerged from somewhere even deeper than the ground beneath my feet – from a source, a cornucopia of Being beyond which our Jewish ancestors tell of a deeper Source they refuse to name? Nameless, yes, - yet whose voice resounds throughout the Hebrew Bible as well as through that buttercup and everything that exists.

Our Biblical Heritage

And as it resounds throughout the New Testament! Why do you think our lector closes every liturgical reading with the phrase: *The Word of the Lord*. Why do you think John's Gospel portrays Jesus as the Word of God? Indeed, he says:

In the beginning was the Word [which is a way of saying it all begins with something audible] and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be. What came to be through him was life . . . And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, . . . full of grace and truth. A Creator who communicates was now also visible, unconcealed in Christ.

Or again may I ask, what about all those episodes throughout the Bible – Old and New – where people are in some way *called* as well as propelled out of one stage into another. Abraham called out of the anonymity of his ancient contemporaries and told to go to *the land I will show you* . . . like the “landscapes” to which we have each been called year after year of our lives, unfolding tomorrow and the next day and the next - as always a land of promise.

And then there is Isaiah hearing a voice ask: *Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?* And Isaiah can't refrain from responding: *Here I am. Send me!* A voice that brooks no resistance, that flips our status quo into a dynamic mobility, an appetite to know, to be, to Exist!

Simon, Andrew, James and John are engaged in their everydayness, preoccupied even mindlessly with their business of catching fish, mending nets, not only forgetful of the deeper reasons for their existence but soon themselves to be forgotten by history - – and along comes this Jesus who says come after me and I will introduce you to an even deeper way of fishing – drawing humanity out of its submersion in everydayness, forgetfulness.

And then there is that next moment – so powerfully depicted by the artist Caravaggio – of Levi seated among colorfully clothed accountants, coins stacked upon their counter – looking up toward a ray of light that reveals the outstretched index finger of Jesus who simply beckons: *Follow me.* And it says he got up and followed, his life no longer to be summed up calculating things but in handling everything he touches and everyone he meets - with care – as holy.

Literature resonates about you

If you think such narratives are simply about biblical characters from long ago – you are uninformed, uneducated as to how to interpret

biblical writing – for each episode is also about you – a stage to which you are summoned to ascend and be drawn into all such accumulated scenes and stories out of the past – and even such as from beyond the Bible – as in the novel *Great Expectations* where you must become the child Pip as he is told, much to his surprise, he is the heir to *Great Expectations* – that his uncle’s smithy is but a point of departure toward Pip’s becoming a wiser, gracious character by the end of the novel – the end of his life.

But beware!

The poem written by Walter De La Mare titled *The Listeners* may also be about you. Actually it could be called *The Non-Listeners* - except that they did *in fact* listen but did not respond:

*Is there anybody there?’ said the Traveller,
Knocking on the moonlit door; . . .*

*And he smote upon the door again a second time;
‘Is there anybody there?’ he said.
But no one descended to the Traveller;
No head from the leaf-fringed sill
Leaned over and looked into his grey eyes,
Where he stood perplexed and still.
But only a host of phantom listeners
That dwelt in the lone house . . .*

*. . . he suddenly smote on the door, even
Louder,
‘Tell them I came, and no one answered,
That I kept my word,” he said.
Never the least stir made the listeners,*

*. . . they heard his foot upon the stirrup,
And the sound of iron on stone,
And how the silence surged softly backward,
When the plunging hoofs were gone.*

We have similar Gospel stories illustrating how we ourselves might choose to remain deaf to the call, the invitation out of the Source of our being to undertake a festive existence – as in Luke 14 where guests are invited to a banquet – but again their habitual reflex to

excuse themselves, to put things off, expresses itself: I have bought a piece of land and must look at it- I am heavy into real estate; I have bought five yoke of oxen (a new pick up truck) and I am going to try them out; I have just been married and domesticity demands my full attention.

Events also talk

Or let's talk about "events", "occurrences" – things that *happen* to us that require a response. Actually the moment calling my attention at so young an age to that buttercup in the grass was such an occurrence – such as theologians and philosophers of modern times describe as a call – *the beginning of a conversation* drawing me out of the aimlessness, the shallowness of my existence – summoning me to exist! for God's sake!!

As with Marcel

And so, for example there is the train ride during which an adolescent Marcel in the novel *In Search of Lost Time* travels from Paris to the seashore resort of Balbec. He is not happy, feels dependent upon his familiar environment, sameness, a predictable routine, anxious of asthma attacks. He spends the night in his narrow train compartment (enclosed as it were within calendar time). Slowly the train comes to a temporary stop at a little station hidden between two mountains. The sun slants through his window. He catches sight of a tall girl climbing a path carrying a jar of milk. She must rarely have seen anyone in this remote place. She passes along the cars offering coffee and milk to a few awakened passengers. Her face was aglow with the light of dawn.

Marcel feels drawn to her – the whole scene possessed a beauty, it signified happiness. He felt moved to get off the train, to settle there. She doesn't see him, he calls to her, she retraces her steps – she fastens her gaze upon him but the doors of the train were closing and soon, as Proust says, Marcel "*was speeding away from the dawn.*"

Experiences like that – sometimes more subtle but memorable anyway - communicate to us – again if we are alert enough to listen - calling us out of our "asthmatic" breathing, our breathlessness day after day – the breathlessness of TV newspeak for instance where every second requires talk, talk talk, clickety, clack, clickety, clack, like the wheels of Marcel's train. But the moment! the occurrence!

leaves its mark – as Marcel says of that brief experience . . . *it gave a TONALITY to all I saw, introduced me as an actor upon the stage of an unknown and infinitely more interesting universe, . . . from which to emerge now would be, as it were, to die to myself.*

Tonality: from tone: which indicates a new pitch or vibration or inflection or mood or emotion or quality or paradigm or strength to all that Marcel saw. Such is the effect of experiences, occurrences that *address us from time to time.*

For example

Analogous to that summons of Marcel, at age fourteen I am a sophomore in high school run by the Christian Brothers. I visit an auditorium where several religious orders display literature about their work and life. I pick up a pamphlet about a small Franciscan Order up in New York State – friars in a cloister photo. It attracts me. It registers. Why? I pick it up and bring it home. Within two weeks I am writing to the Order's vocation director indicating my desire to join . . . within a short time relative to the adolescent track I was then on, I am sidetracked into a subsequent twenty two years of immersion in experiences that irretrievably carry me (often confusedly, reluctantly) into an even wider, deeper conversation with the same - now more intimate - voice that way back then told me to pick up that pamphlet.

The Call of Conscience

We are all familiar with that phrase. We learn early that conscience is a faculty that monitors our conduct, obliging us to do good and avoid evil. And again we imagine it as vocal – a *call* to behave morally, justly. By way of tablets like the ten commandments and those catalogues that spell out virtues and vices in detail, we evaluate ourselves with a view to reform. They echo the call of conscience in *particular ways*. But morality thus classified and specified can be too much to handle; priorities are given to this behavior or that. The enticements of everydayness pull us this way and that. It's hard to keep up with things we *ought* to do. Conscience as we understand it has to do, it seems, with paying debts, our dues, bookkeeping – a kind of commercial thing instead of transformative.

Authentic Conscience

But the conscience that calls us to a more authentic way of being reaches deeper than such catalogues. Christ's *Sermon on the*

Mount draws us more closely to the ethical source of the world's existence and ours. It offers us the simpler and all-inclusive challenge to *care!* To care about things, about where we come from, where we are going in terms of our possibilities; to care about what we are and who we are; to live out of a *concern* for all things as family – ourselves as responsible for and responsive to others.

Thomas Sheehan in his study of Martin Heidegger uses the word “mind”. We are called to “mind” things - as in “mind the store” or “mind the baby” or “mind” such things as the invention of an atomic bomb – “mind” in the sense of “be seriously concerned”, “pay attention”! As in “mind” one’s demented spouse out of a most radical, gut-level of love.

Such is the call of that fundamental, authentic Conscience to which we must learn to hearken, to which even that buttercup of long ago bade me listen.

It’s all there in St. Paul’s *Letter to the Corinthians* where he says:

If I speak in human and angelic tongues but do not have love (caritas), I am a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal.

And if I have the gift of prophecy and comprehend all mysteries and all knowledge [and merit the Nobel Prize or an Academy Award]; if I have all faith so as to move mountains [or land on Mars] but do not have love (caritas), I am nothing.

If I give away everything I own, . . . so that I may boast but do not have love (caritas), I gain nothing . . . Love (caritas) never fails . . .

When I was a child I used to talk as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I put aside childish things.

At present we see indistinctly, as in a mirror, but then face to face. At present I know partially; then I shall know fully, as I am fully known.

So faith, hope, love (caritas) remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love (caritas: synonymous with concern, care, giving a damn, minding the store).

Postscript:

Speaking of looking into a mirror, if you become responsive to experience as I have portrayed it, you might do what Paul does in that final quote, i.e. look into a mirror and one day be able to say to your self – and to God as the Source of your being -

Getting to know you,
Getting to know all about you.
Getting to like you,
Getting to hope you'll like me.

Getting to know you,
Putting it my way - but nicely,
You are precisely,
My cup of tea.

Getting to know you,
Getting to feel free and easy
When I am with you,
Getting to know what to say

Haven't you noticed
Suddenly I'm bright and breezy?
Because of all the beauty and new
Things I'm learning about you
Day by day.

(from the lyrics of *The King and I*)