

Listening to Life

Some time when the river is ice ask me
mistakes I have made. Ask me whether
what I have done is my life. Others
have come in their slow way into
my thought, and some have tried to help
or to hurt: ask me what difference
their strongest love or hate has made.

I will listen to what you say.
You and I can turn and look
at the silent river and wait. We know
the current is there, hidden; and there
are comings and goings from miles away
that hold the stillness exactly before us.
What the river says, that is what I say.

—William Stafford, “ASK ME”¹

“Ask me whether what I have done is my life.” For some, those words will be nonsense, nothing more than a poet’s loose way with language and logic. Of course what I have done is my life! To what am I supposed to compare it?

But for others, and I am one, the poet’s words will be precise, piercing, and disquieting. They remind me of moments when it is clear—if I have eyes to see—that the life I am living is not the same as the life that wants to live in me. In those moments I sometimes catch a glimpse of my true life, a life hidden like the river beneath the ice. And in the spirit of the poet, I wonder: What am I meant to do? Who am I meant to be?

I was in my early thirties when I began, literally, to wake up to questions about my vocation. By all appearances, things were going well, but the soul does not put much stock in appearances. Seeking a path more purposeful than accumulating wealth, holding power, winning at competition, or securing a career, I had started to understand that it is indeed possible to live a life other than one's own. Fearful that I was doing just that—but uncertain about the deeper, truer life I sensed hidden inside me, uncertain whether it was real or trustworthy or within reach—I would snap awake in the middle of the night and stare for long hours at the ceiling.

Then I ran across the old Quaker saying, “Let your life speak.” I found those words encouraging, and I thought I understood what they meant: “Let the highest truths and values guide you. Live up to those demanding standards in everything you do.” Because I had heroes at the time who seemed to be doing exactly that, this exhortation had incarnate meaning for me—it meant living a life like that of Martin Luther King Jr. or Rosa Parks or Mahatma Gandhi or Dorothy Day, a life of high purpose.

So I lined up the loftiest ideals I could find and set out to achieve them. The results were rarely admirable, often laughable, and sometimes grotesque. But always they were unreal, a distortion of my true self—as must be the case when one lives from the outside in, not the inside out. I had simply found a “noble” way to live a life that was not my own, a life spent imitating heroes instead of listening to my heart.

Today, some thirty years later, “Let your life speak” means something else to me, a meaning faithful both to the ambiguity of those words and to the complexity of my own experience: “Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you. Before you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to, let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent.”

My youthful understanding of “Let your life speak” led me to conjure up the highest values I could imagine and then try to conform my life to them whether they were mine or not. If that sounds like what we are *supposed* to do with values, it is because that is what we are too often taught. There is a simplistic brand of moralism among us that wants to reduce the ethical life to making a list, checking it twice—against the index in some best-selling book of virtues, perhaps—and then trying very hard to be not naughty but nice.

There may be moments in life when we are so unformed that we need to use values like an exoskeleton to keep us from collapsing. But something is very wrong if such moments recur often in adulthood. Trying to live someone else’s life, or to live by an abstract norm, will invariably fail—and may even do great damage.

Vocation, the way I was seeking it, becomes an act of will, a grim determination that one’s life will go this way or that whether it wants to or not. If the self is sin-ridden and will bow to truth and goodness only under duress, that approach to vocation makes sense. But if the self seeks not pathology but wholeness, as I believe it does, then the willful pursuit of vocation is an act of violence toward ourselves—violence in the name of a vision that, however lofty, is forced on the self from without rather than grown from within. True self, when violated, will always resist us, sometimes at great cost, holding our lives in check until we honor its truth.

Vocation does not come from willfulness. It comes from listening. I must listen to my life and try to understand what it is truly about—quite apart from what I would like it to be about—or my life will never represent anything real in the world, no matter how earnest my intentions.

That insight is hidden in the word *vocation* itself, which is rooted in the Latin for “voice.” Vocation does not mean a goal that I pursue. It means a calling that I hear. Before I can tell my life what

I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am. I must listen for the truths and values at the heart of my own identity, not the standards by which I *must* live—but the standards by which I cannot help but live if I am living my own life.

Behind this understanding of vocation is a truth that the ego does not want to hear because it threatens the ego's turf: everyone has a life that is different from the "I" of daily consciousness, a life that is trying to live through the "I" who is its vessel. This is what the poet knows and what every wisdom tradition teaches: there is a great gulf between the way my ego wants to identify me, with its protective masks and self-serving fictions, and my true self.

It takes time and hard experience to sense the difference between the two—to sense that running beneath the surface of the experience I call my life, there is a deeper and truer life waiting to be acknowledged. That fact alone makes "listen to your life" difficult counsel to follow. The difficulty is compounded by the fact that from our first days in school, we are taught to listen to everything and everyone but ourselves, to take all our clues about living from the people and powers around us.

I sometimes lead retreats, and from time to time participants show me the notes they are taking as the retreat unfolds. The pattern is nearly universal: people take copious notes on what the retreat leader says, and they sometimes take notes on the words of certain wise people in the group, but rarely, if ever, do they take notes on what they themselves say. We listen for guidance everywhere except from within.

I urge retreatants to turn their note-taking around, because the words we speak often contain counsel we are trying to give ourselves. We have a strange conceit in our culture that simply because we have said something, we understand what it means! But often we do not—especially when we speak from a deeper place than intellect or ego, speak the kind of words that arise when the inner

teacher feels safe enough to tell its truth. At those moments, we need to listen to what our lives are saying *and* take notes on it, lest we forget our own truth or deny that we ever heard it.

Verbalizing is not the only way our lives speak, of course. They speak through our actions and reactions, our intuitions and instincts, our feelings and bodily states of being, perhaps more profoundly than through our words. We are like plants, full of tropisms that draw us toward certain experiences and repel us from others. If we can learn to read our own responses to our own experience—a text we are writing unconsciously every day we spend on earth—we will receive the guidance we need to live more authentic lives.

But if I am to let my life speak things I want to hear, things I would gladly tell others, I must also let it speak things I do not want to hear and would never tell anyone else! My life is not only about my strengths and virtues; it is also about my liabilities and my limits, my trespasses and my shadow. An inevitable though often ignored dimension of the quest for “wholeness” is that we must embrace what we dislike or find shameful about ourselves as well as what we are confident and proud of. That is why the poet says, “ask me mistakes I have made.”

In the chapters to come, I speak often of my own mistakes—of wrong turns I have taken, of misreadings of my own reality—for hidden in these moments are important clues to my own vocation. I do not feel despondent about my mistakes, any more than the poet does, though I grieve the pain they have sometimes caused others. Our lives are “experiments with truth” (to borrow the subtitle of Gandhi’s autobiography), and in an experiment negative results are at least as important as successes.² I have no idea how I would have learned the truth about myself and my calling without the mistakes I have made, though by that measure I should have written a much longer book!

How we are to listen to our lives is a question worth exploring. In our culture, we tend to gather information in ways that do not work

very well when the source is the human soul: the soul is not responsive to subpoenas or cross-examinations. At best it will stand in the dock only long enough to plead the Fifth Amendment. At worst it will jump bail and never be heard from again. The soul speaks its truth only under quiet, inviting, and trustworthy conditions.

The soul is like a wild animal—tough, resilient, savvy, self-sufficient, and yet exceedingly shy. If we want to see a wild animal, the last thing we should do is to go crashing through the woods, shouting for the creature to come out. But if we are willing to walk quietly into the woods and sit silently for an hour or two at the base of a tree, the creature we are waiting for may well emerge, and out of the corner of an eye we will catch a glimpse of the precious wildness we seek.

That is why the poem at the head of this chapter ends in silence—and why I find it a bit embarrassing that as this chapter ends, I am drawing the reader not toward silence but toward speech, page after page of speech! I hope that my speech is faithful to what I have heard, in the silence, from my soul. And I hope that the reader who sits with this book can hear the silence that always surrounds us in the writing and reading of words. It is a silence that forever invites us to fathom the meaning of our lives—and forever reminds us of depths of meaning that words will never touch.