

Listening

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DARTON · LONGMAN + TODD

Introduction

'The unreflected life is not worth living'
(Socrates)

To think in terms of listening to myself in a world where millions starve, suffer from violence, homelessness and flooding might sound a strange pathway to either prayer or ministry. Yet the Bible provides clear pointers to listen to ourselves. The Psalmist wrote, 'When you are on your beds, search out your hearts and be silent' (Psalm 4:4). We are to 'examine our ways and test them' (Lamentations 3:40). Paul wrote, 'think of yourself with sober judgment' (Romans 12:3). When Jesus withdrew from the public eye to a quiet place, it is likely that he spent time in self-reflection as well as in prayer to his Father. 'He knew what was in man' and that was partly because he knew himself.

To grow in self-understanding involves becoming aware of what is happening within me at different levels of my being, learning to listen to myself. Inside each of us there are many and varied voices, some expressed, some known but unexpressed and some deeply repressed. Some voices we are happy to own (our achievements, satisfactions, joys, hopes) whilst others we would often prefer to disown (our fears, prejudices, guilts, jealousies). At times we can be uncomfortably aware of a confusing hubbub of voices within, all trying to speak at the same time. This is not just a twentieth century way of looking at things either. Richard III, in Shakespeare's play, wakes up in the night before the Battle of Bosworth Field with a nightmare:

It is now dead midnight,
 Cold fearful drops stand on my trembling flesh
 What do I fear? Myself? There's none else by:
 Richard loves Richard; that is, I am I.
 Is there a murderer here? No – yes, I am:
 Then fly. What, from myself? Great reason why –
 Lest I lack revenge. What, myself upon myself!
 Alack, I love myself. Wherefore? For only good
 That I myself have done unto myself?
 Oh, no! Alas I rather hate myself!
 I am a villain; yet I lie, I am not!

'I am I', 'I am a villain', 'yet I lie, I am not', 'lest I lack revenge, What, myself upon myself! Alack, I love myself', 'Alas, I rather hate myself'. Mixed messages – yet most of us can, at least in part, identify with Richard in his confusion as to who he felt himself most genuinely to be.

Listening to my inner world is not necessarily comfortable yet it is as I dare to listen and hear that I gradually become aware of the different levels of identity and my continuing need for further integration and healing. And whilst the Holy Spirit is the agent of change, God still needs my active co-operation to bring about those changes that are for my growth and maturing. Moreover, and paradoxically, it is as I listen to and begin to understand the depths of myself that I become more not less available to others and their personal depths. Recognising some of my own contradictions makes me more open and compassionate to theirs. This struck me once when a student told me, with a broad smile, of his inner despair – 'the smiling depression' doctors call it. I had often used that particular defence myself when depressed and had experienced the loneliness of it.

Listening to myself is about listening to a story in the making – a story involving all the different parts of me and my life. It concerns the things that happen to me – outer events and activities – together with my inner perceptions – my thinking,

beliefs and attitudes, my feelings, my relationships, my satisfactions and my needs, my past as well as my present.

Each day of my life I am making my own story. That story becomes immeasurably enriched as I learn to reflect on the different parts, for it is this interplay between the outer and the inner and my perceptions of it that comprise the uniqueness of my story. But won't this lead to self-centred introspection? Surely life is for living, not sitting around thinking about myself? Wrongly used, self-reflection can certainly become the kind of introspection that stunts Christian growth, causing some to spiral down into self-despair. Rightly used, it can become a creative means of growth into Christian maturity, making us more available to God and other people, for only what is recognised, accepted and owned by us can be given away. And it is very likely that, for every individual who pays too much attention to the inner life, there are another ten who do so too little, failing to develop that inwardness which is a preparation for action rather than an end in itself.

This is very different from the humanistic goal of 'self-realisation' or 'self-actualisation', frequent themes in contemporary humanistic psychology. For

no amount of introspection, self-discovery, seeking for the buried parts of our experience can bring wholeness if we make diversity and discovery our ultimate values. There is a mysterious centre to our being, hard to describe or discuss, yet indispensable to our integrity. Modern man's greatest problem is that he has lost contact with this centre and he experiences overwhelming feelings of disintegration.¹

Campbell describes this 'centre' in Thomas Merton's words as 'the inner sanctuary where self-awareness goes beyond analytical reflection, and opens out into . . . confrontation with . . . one who is more intimate to us than we are to ourselves'² – that is, God himself.

It is as we listen to ourselves in the context of the God who made us and knows us that we discover our deepest identity,

not 'I alone' but 'I in him' and this is the Christian context we shall be exploring in this section.

1

The Story of My Life

Other people's stories have always fascinated me – not only the outward things that happen to them but also the inner movements of their thinking, feeling, spirit.

In AD 401 Augustine of Hippo, bishop and theologian, published his *Confessions*. This was a new kind of book – not simply a confession of past sins and newly found faith (though it was that) but a working out of his personal struggles, searching for significant patterns in his life, fashioning his own story. He constantly asked questions of himself – why was this so? Where was God when this happened? And yet, Rowan Williams points out, 'the question repeatedly modulates into a different key; not, Where was God? but, Where was I? "But where was I when I was seeking You? You were there in front of me, but I had wandered away from myself. And if I could not find my own self, how much less could I find You?"' (V. 2)³ Augustine's *Confessions* are a profoundly theological example of a man struggling to listen to and understand himself in the light of the God who made and knew him.

C. S. Lewis described significant parts of his life story in *Surprised by Joy* and particularly his conversion. He was intently aware of his own inner self one day when, going up Headington Hill, Oxford, on the top of a bus,

I became aware that I was holding something at bay, or shutting something out. Or, if you like, that I was wearing some stiff clothing, like corsets, or even a suit of armour, as if I were a lobster. I felt myself being, there and then, given a free choice. I could open the door or keep it shut; I could

unbuckle the armour or keep it on . . . I chose to open, to unbuckle, to loosen the rein.

He became aware too of new feelings within:

I felt as if I were a man of snow at long last beginning to melt. The melting was starting in my back – drip – drip and presently trickle – trickle. I rather disliked the feeling.⁴

Momentous things were happening to him even though all an observer would have seen was a man on the top deck of a bus.

Dame Janet Baker decided to keep a journal of her last year as an opera singer before she retired. She wrote: 'I wanted to put one year of my life under a microscope, so to speak, because this particular year would be the last of its kind'. In the midst of very full days – rehearsals, performances, travel, planning, entertaining, public demand – she also made time to reflect on what was happening within,

The years have taught me that the part of me which is a down-to-earth, Yorkshire working woman and the part of me which is an artist, can live together peaceably and enjoy all the different facets of this extraordinary life of mine; the battle has ceased to rage . . . There are indeed many diverse pieces of the jigsaw puzzle but I am beginning to see that they can fit into a pattern, and make up a coherent whole rather than tear me apart, making me feel as though I don't truly belong anywhere.⁵

Personal reflection, listening to the different and sometimes conflicting things within, is a way of laying hold of my life, living it to the full rather than simply letting it come and go unexamined. Henri Nouwen found, during his seven months' stay in a Trappist monastery, that he was learning a great deal about himself as well as about God (but then these are intimately linked). In the silence of the monastery he was able to hear himself more clearly. He realised how much his anger created 'restlessness, brooding, inner dispute and made prayer nearly impossible'. 'The most disturbing anger was the anger

at myself for not responding properly, for not knowing how to express my disagreement . . . and for letting small and seemingly insignificant events have so much power over my emotional life.⁶ He goes on to describe the personal learning that went on for him. Rather than succumbing to unresolved inner conflict, he learnt how to listen to himself more honestly and learn new things which would affect his relationships with God and other people.

Gerard Hughes SJ in *In Search of a Way* tells the story both of the outer journey when he spent ten weeks walking from Weybridge to Rome, and of his inner journey.

God speaks to us in the depths of our being, not off the top of our heads. The depths of ourselves are not in our reasoning and ideas. If we are to find God, we must learn to listen to these depths, to the emotions and feelings which we experience in prayer and out of it, and use our minds and intelligence to help us understand what these emotions and feelings are saying to us.⁷

These people's stories are all published but each of us is making our own story as we live out our days. It is made up of the outer and the inner, the ordinary and the extraordinary, the joyful and the painful. It includes all that happens to me and every part of me – my thinking, feelings, relationships, strengths, weaknesses, past and present. It is the story of my life. Hopefully, from the examples given, it is becoming clear that listening to myself and the growth in understanding that can come out of that, is not an invitation to self-centred living but rather the very opposite – an invitation to discover and live my life to the full in the context of the God who made me.

What prevents us from doing this? For some it may be over-busyness, letting our feet run our lives so that we never make time to become still and turn our attention inwards. Or it may be that we let our thinking dominate us at the expense of listening to our feelings, or vice versa. Some may fear what will surface from their own inner depths whilst others are unaware that one part of them, such as their body, is trying to

communicate something important. Living in these ways is only half living. If 'the glory of God is a man fully alive' then this will include us being in touch with our own inner depths and listening to them. If we are out of touch with ourselves, not only will we miss out but so will others, for we shall be out of touch with them too. Esther de Waal aptly writes:

No-one can be a good host who is not at home in his own house. Nor can I be a good host until I am rooted in my own centre. Then, and only then, have I something to give to others.⁸

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