



## **Stop, Look, Listen**

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July 25, 2010

Do you like slugs? I ask that because most people don't---or at least they don't like the result of slug activity. But I wonder how many of you have looked closely at a slug. I actually have---not because of any moral superiority on my part although I **do** respect the Web of Life. No, I started looking closely at slugs because I was teaching a unit on invertebrates to my 5<sup>th</sup> grade students and nothing grabs the attention of 10 year olds like really yucky invertebrates. If any of you are parents of 10 year olds, let me recommend the bait shop in Northside where you can get worms, crickets, and leeches. You have to find your own slugs. Looking at a slug up close with a magnifying glass is a revelation. Instead of reviling the slug as I once had done, I was rewarded with some amazing details. First of all, slugs have retractable eyes. That is, their eyes are on the ends of stalks which look like antennae. If you slowly put a finger close to the end of the eyestalk, it recedes into the slug's head---very cool. A slug has an air hole on the side of its body and it's not little. It's pretty big relative to the size of the slug. You can see a slight pulsating of the hole as the slug breathes.

Slugs have teeth, too. Tiny hairlike teeth. But if you starve the slug for a day, or should I say withhold food, you can place the slug on a lettuce leaf and observe how they can do so much damage to your hostas.

I had an experience recently which reminded me of the awe I experienced when closely examining the slug. I spent 20 days in Taiwan and 10 days in mainland China. During this time, I took 765 pictures. Now I didn't take that many photos by shooting all landscapes or prominent buildings. (And it's probably prudent at this point to assure you that I won't be showing you those 765 pictures this morning.) What I found when I was reviewing my photos was that I paid attention to details in a way I rarely do at home. So there are photos of a single calla lily, a fence railing, the design at the end of a drain pipe, an offering of food at a Buddhist Temple, and seasoned rice wrapped in bamboo leaves and tied with string. I paid attention to details because I was looking with intensity and listening intently as well. Frequently the conversation around me was in Chinese and in spite of my best efforts I showed an appalling inability to pick up the language. In fact, the only thing I could reliably say at the end of 30 days was "xia, xia" which means "Thank you". Then because saying "xia, xia" often produced a stream of Chinese (not from me obviously), I had to learn to say "Joe Whey Schwa xia, xia" which, my brother tells me means, "I can only say thank you". Still, because I was listening so intently, I could often discern the topic and especially the emotional tone of the conversation.

Whether looking at a slug or experiencing a different culture, I was looking and listening in a different way and the experience made me wonder---what if I looked and listened intently when I was in more familiar surroundings?

This morning I ask you to join me on this admittedly personal journey as I attempt to answer my own question. How can I focus my attention in a familiar environment, and moreover, why bother?

Let me answer the “Why bother?” part of the question first because it is perhaps more a statement of faith than a provable point. To me, looking and listening with intensity is, first of all, its own reward. There is a great deal of pleasure in noticing details and nuances. In addition, I believe that focusing attention is an excellent problem solving skill. Noticing details sharpens my understanding and clarifies my thinking.

We are Unitarians-Universalists, visionaries, Big Picture People, and I certainly appreciate those qualities, but for the moment, I want to look through a microscope---to bring into focus those images, ideas, and sounds that we often overlook.

One way to change the way we look at things is to, literally, change our point of view. Every object looks different as we change our position in space or as we change the position of the object. To walk around the lily and to see it from different angles, in the morning and the evening, in bright light and shadows, is to change our perspective and to experience the lily in a new way, and very possibly to increase both our enjoyment and understanding of the flower.

Surely, no one had a better grasp of detail and perspective than Ed Lutton, a longtime, much respected, and still missed member of this congregation, who painstakingly transferred the pollen of one species of daylily to another in order to create new varieties that he named after members of his family. His “Virginia” daylilies, were named after his wife and my good friend.

As I considered perspective, I was reminded of a charming picture book written by Mem Fox, an amazingly sensitive writer. The book is called Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge after the little boy who is the main character. **“His house is next door to an old people’s home and he knew all the people who lived there.” But his favourite person of all was Miss Nancy Alison Delacourt Cooper because she had four names just as he did.”**

When his mother and father express pity for Miss Nancy because she has lost her memory, Wilfrid decides to find out what memory is and he asks all the residents of the home for answers. This is what they tell him: Memory is something warm; Something from long ago; It makes you cry; It makes you laugh; and it's as precious as gold. Now so far, Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge is a very good Unitarian. He wants to understand this memory thing from an intellectual perspective and he does his research. Then he does something surprising, at least to me. He makes the abstract notion of memory concrete. He puts into a basket objects that he associates with each of the aspects of memory he has learned about through his research. Into the basket go shells, a puppet, a medal his grandfather had given him, a football he treasured, and a fresh warm egg. And he takes those objects to Miss Nancy. The new warm egg reminds her of **“tiny speckled blue eggs she had once found in a bird's nest in her aunt's garden.”** Each of the objects awakens within her a memory from her own life. As she remembers, she is sad and happy and both of them smile because **“(Miss Nancy's) memory had been found again.”**

I refer to this book because it seems to me that Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge is able to achieve something really remarkable by changing perspective---by looking at memory not as an abstraction but as something concrete. If memory is concrete, then why not pick it up and put it in a basket?

The movie, Precious-- Have you seen it? --- features an extremely overweight teenaged girl whose home life is truly horrific. She has two children by her own abusive father, and she is terrorized and berated by her alcoholic mother who continually tells her she is stupid and worthless. The odds for success, even for completing high school, are certainly not in her favor, yet Precious makes some wise choices. She enrolls in an alternative school and eventually distances herself from her family in order to protect herself and her children. The end of the movie is hopeful. Precious, we can

believe, is going to make it. Why? How does she succeed when so many fail? The thing that sets Precious apart is that she was always able to visualize herself in different situations---often as a successful star surrounded by an adoring public. These situations are shown in the film as waking dream sequences. Curiously, she does not see herself as thin. She is who she is, but she does see herself from a different point of view than the one passed on to her by her father and mother. This ability to visualize herself as lovable and successful gives her the power to make good choices, the power to take advantage of the help offered to her by concerned, dedicated adults. Looking at their situations from a different perspective allowed Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge and Precious to create a new reality, and that reality allowed each of them to be successful where others had failed.

Just as I am interested in **visually** and **conceptually focusing** on objects and situations, I am also interested in **listening** more intently. As a teacher, it was helpful to listen selectively. That is, to focus on what one child was saying while shutting out the din of rustling papers, gurgling aquariums, the sharpening of pencils, and the scraping of chair legs. Of course, my students always listened to me with great concentration.

What I have in mind when I say “to listen intently” **is** to listen with great concentration, but it is more than that. I want to be able to look and listen with such focus, such intensity, that the experience is “extraordinary” and pushes the limits of what is possible.

Once again I turned to the simplicity and poetry of a picture book called The Other Way to Listen by Byrd Baylor. The story is told from the point of view of a young boy who is walking with an old man in the desert. The boy begins:

**“I used to know an old man who could walk by any corn field and hear the corn singing.”**

The boy wants to know how he can learn to hear this way---a way that is surprising and elusive to the boy though not to the old man. He asks again and again for the man's help. Gradually, the man begins to give him some hints.

Hint #1: Be quiet. Of course, that makes sense. None of us can hear the corn sing, or anything else, for that matter unless we're quiet. In her book Eat, Pray, Love, Elizabeth Gilbert goes to see the great Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh speak. The room is filled with edgy, stressed New Yorkers. After coming on stage, the monk sat quietly for a long time and as Gilbert describes it:

**“In the space of maybe ten minutes, this small Vietnamese man had drawn every single one of us into his silence. Or, maybe it's more accurate to say he drew us each into our own silence, into that peace which we each inherently possessed...” (124)**

The man in Byrd Baylor's book describes being in a canyon after a rain.

**“He said it was the quietest place he had ever been and he stayed there long enough to understand the quiet.”**

It was so quiet that the old man heard:

**“wildflower seeds burst open, beginning to grow underground.”**

Clearly, both Gilbert and Baylor are talking about a quietness that is greater than keeping our mouths shut. It is way more than not talking. I think they are describing an inner stillness so deep that it opens us up to the world. The trick, of course, is accessing it.

Hint #2: Take the time. The old man tells the boy that he knows people who have heard a whole sky full of stars and who have heard cacti blooming in the dark. He continues:

**“Most people never hear those things at all.”**

**The boy said, “I wonder why.”**

**The old man said, “They just don’t take the time you need for something that important.”**

I’m wondering if we don’t need to take that time now more than ever. Recently, I read an article in the New York Times about how multitasking on various electronic media changes the way we think. It describes a man, Kord Campbell, a multi-tasker who is flooded with e-mail, on-line chats, multiple computer screens, and instant messaging, all going on at the same time.

**His wife complains, “It seems like he can no longer be fully in the moment.” (1)**

Not only is electronic multi-tasking annoying to his family, it is not efficient. Research shows that multi-taskers are less productive, and have trouble focusing. They have difficulty filtering out irrelevant information, and they are more stressed. Moreover, **“even after the multi-tasking ends.....the lack of focus persists.” (2)**

Clifford Nass, a communications professor at Stanford, thinks the **“ultimate risk of heavy technology use is that it diminishes empathy by limiting how much people engage with one another, even in the same room.” “The way we become more human is by paying attention to each other,” he said, “It shows how much you care.” (11)**

When the old man says people just don’t take the time for something that important, maybe it really is **that** important. Maybe in some way our humanity is at stake when we don’t take the time to listen intently.

Hint #3: Start Small

Remember the boy in Byrd Baylor’s book. He wants to learn to hear corn sing. He knows to be quiet, and he agrees to take the time, but the old man says that really listening requires even more.

And so the man said, “Do this: get to know one thing as well as you can. It should be something small. Don’t start with a mountain. Don’t start with the whole Pacific Ocean. Start with one seed pod or one dry weed or one horned toad or one handful of dirt or one sandy wash.”

And he gives the boy two other pieces of advice. First, respect and learn from everything.

“If you think you’re better than a horned toad you’ll never hear its voice---even if you sit there in the sun forever. And, he said, “Don’t be ashamed to learn from bugs or sand or anything.”

His second piece of advice:

“It’s good to walk with people but sometimes go alone.” “That way, he said, “You can always stop and listen at the right time.”

And so the boy went into the hills. He went often. He even sang to the hills. He did hear quail, coyote, and doves but he just heard things that anybody could hear which, honestly, is reason enough to listen so intently. But, like me, the boy wanted a transcendent experience.

On one trip, after being away for 5 days, the boy went into the hills and sang to them as usual, but this time it was different. The hills were singing too. The boy listened harder than he had ever listened in his life. The sound wasn’t like anything he could explain. But it seemed to him it was the oldest sound in the world.

He was standing in the middle of that sound at seven o’clock in the morning...

Just thinking: **HERE I AM** and thinking **LISTEN**

And it seemed like the most natural thing in the world.

Even if we do as the old man says, we are not promised transcendence. But, if we are quiet, if we practice looking and listening intently and if we take time then we honor the person or object of our attention and, I believe, they in turn will honor us. I know that when I'm talking to people I sometimes only half listen because I'm busy formulating my response or my next question. I fear a moment of silence and rush to fill it. But isn't it worth a small moment of social awkwardness to honor a person or object with my full attention? Such looking, such listening is not easy. It takes practice and even the boy in Baylor's story doesn't do it all the time. I do not for one moment want to underestimate the difficulty of that practice. I've tried meditating. I can relate to the conversation Elizabeth Gilbert had with herself in our first reading. It seems to me that the kind of listening, Baylor is talking about is really a spiritual practice. Let me emphasize PRACTICE. It is an exercise and it must be repeated. We need to open our minds in humility and respect so that we can learn from the smallest objects in our environment. The practice is often solitary and it requires persistence. We have to do it again, and again, and again.

But finally, the energy of that concentrated practice is transferred into a deep understanding that educates, informs, sustains, and inspires us. And when that happens, it will seem like "the most natural thing in the world."

New York Times Reprints

“Hooked on Gadgets, and Paying a Mental Price”

Matt Richtel

June 10, 2010

The Other way to Listen by Byrd Baylor (32 pages total)

Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge by Mem Fox (32 pages total)

Eat, Pray, Love by Elizabeth Gilbert