

LISTENING TO AND FOLLOWING THE HEART: A SPIRITUAL CORNERSTONE OF RECOVERY AND WELL BEING (Rough Draft and 09-15-2015 Version)

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There is an old story about a patient who went to her family doctor. Following assessment, the doctor told the patient the findings of her examination. Upon learning of the diagnosed illness and the recommended treatment, the patient expressed refusal to follow the outlined treatment regimen. Then she asked "Doctor, am I going to get well?" The doctor replied "That depends on which one of us is the doctor." The physician knew that recovery from illness would require listening to and then following instruction.

We all have resources that guide us. Many of these are external. We have those around us who have gained education, experience, and even expertise, who will have sound advice, guidelines, and even accompanying compassion to helping us overcome trial, transcend adversity, recover from illness, and experience growth, happiness, and transcendence in our lives. These external sources of guidance may be professionals who are competent and who truly care. They may be family members or friends who have our best interest in their hearts. Guidance may come from "higher power" – a spiritual source of strength, power, beauty, wisdom, goodness, and peace beyond our own. Sometimes, those in this external circle of support help us to connect with, understand, and follow our own internal source of guidance, understanding, and knowing. The following personal story tells of one instance of an "inner knowing," and of listening to and following "heart."

One night, in the early years of my career of counseling troubled youth, it was late in the evening, 9:30 or 10:00 at night. Early the next morning, I was to take 25 teenagers from our high school on an intensive therapeutic wilderness survival trip in the Escalante Outback of Southern Utah. All commitments, arrangements, and preparations were made for those who signed up to go. There was one 17 year old girl, whom I had met, counseled briefly, and cared about. I was concerned for her. She was not on the list, and was not going on the trip. There was no indication of interest, no parental permission, and no signed forms. I kept thinking of her, and beyond thoughts, I had a strong and unrelenting feeling to call her and check up on her. An hundred thoughts of doubt and obstacle followed such as, "it's too late to call", "it is far too late for her to get ready for the trip" "she will be alright", "I have no right to intrude on her decision to not go," and "What would her parents think?" Thankfully, knowing that I needed to call was more loud and more clear than those other distracting thoughts. I called, and after a brief discussion with both she and her parents, items were gathered, and she came on the journey. I didn't think much more about the decisions that both she and I had made until a couple days later. During an overnight 24 hour solo experience in that wilderness, I went to "check in" on her. I sat down in the dirt with her and we talked about her wilderness experience, her life, her family, her dreams, aspirations, fears, struggles, and some of her emotional demons. In that conversation she said "I just want to thank you for calling me the other night, and insisting that I come on this trip. Nobody knows this, but I was in the middle of carrying out my plans to kill myself when you called." She explained more details. After a few shared tears, I expressed gratitude for her sharing, for her life, and her decision to come on the trip. We finished our discussion. As I walked away, I really started thinking pretty hard about the importance of listening to those messages of the heart. The "heart" is not the word I used to describe it then, but I learned that day, again, in a powerful way, that this idea of learning to listen and follow would be important in my life, in my work with patients, and

that it would be important in their lives as well. That was more than 30 years ago. On that important night, gratefully, I was not the only one who listened to the heart. A seventeen year old girl listened to her heart as well. Sometimes moments of listening and heart become a part of a small but important miracle, and sometimes one moment of listening and responding can lead to an opportunity for others to also receive and listen to a message from their heart.

I am grateful for a belief that each one of us has this internal source of strength, understanding, knowing, wisdom, truth, clarity, direction, and comfort. This source of internal guidance has been referred to as "Heart" or "The Heart." Each person will have their own individual way to conceptualize, describe, and experience "Heart." As I have discussed this experience of "Heart" with other professionals and with clients, I have learned that this idea is in the main, universally accepted, and that is most often embraced. All whom I have talked to revealed that they have had their own direct experience with this, or had friends or family members who have shared with them their stories of listening to or following heart. This spiritual concept and pathway of growth, becoming, and healing allows and encourages individual interpretation, meaning, and language of "Heart" experiences. There are many names for and concepts of "Heart," which fit different, particular, and individualized spiritual beliefs of an individual. The following give example of just a few: "unconscious mind," "the real me," "my best self," "the guru within," "the wise mind," "following my gut," "the wizard within," "intuition," "inspiration," and "God talking to me." While language, interpretation, meaning, and attribution of source of these experiences may be very different, the "Heart" experience and capacity is real, and the experiencing of it, I believe, is a spiritual experience.

Renowned "Heart" researcher McRaty and associates found some biological underpinnings of the experience of "Heart," which are beginning cornerstones for the biological science of "Heart," and of what many have reported and referred to as the experience and practice of "Intuition." He suggests from research findings that 1) The heart has its own kind of "neural activity," 2) That information traveling from the heart to the frontal cortex of the brain can "influence" decision making of the brain, and 3) That the heart itself can make decisions without input from structures of the brain. These studies add validity and strength to the field which seeks to understanding about "ways of knowing" which add to, but are not constrained by scientific method, and go beyond intellectual understanding. The "heart" is one of these primary spiritual sources of understanding and truth.

The experience and impact of "attunement with heart" is most often seen in quiet, small, and ongoing ways in the lives of simple and good men, women, and children all around the world. It can be noticed when a small child shares a toys with a crying peer, despite his longing for the toy. It was witnessed a couple years ago when a city policeman, faced with arresting a mother who stole food from a store to feed her hungry children hungry children – instead went into the same store on bought the mother and her children some groceries to eat. Following a deeply felt hunch, facing fear rather than avoiding, defying logic to do what one knows is right, and keeping focus on a superordinate goal or desire rather than succumbing to self- defeating patterns, giving of oneself to help another, and being clear about what is true, are all examples of the honoring of the message of one's heart.

Lisa Miller (2015) teaches that Children are naturally attuned to their hearts and the hearts of others. When this heart connection and other spiritual experiences of the child are either ignored, or extinguished, or shamed – the attunement begins to suffer. Problems or obstacles to "attunement" or "following the heart" include the following: The first "heart" problem is when here is a "disconnection from the heart." This is a "failure to notice the heart." When the distractions of the "less important" become a focus of time, attention, and energy, connection to heart begins to wear. Disconnection can

occur when there is too much of chasing approval and other external sources of validation, and not enough attending to the ways of knowing which are internal. This disconnection can happen when there is addictive illness which narrows focus onto the addictive substance and process, or when one is in an intense emotional state of fear, depression, or “overwhelm.” The second problem which impairs a following of heart is “our failure to trust the heart.” Too many good people believe that their biggest problem that they can’t trust themselves, their judgment, and their heart because of past mistakes. Sadly, the opposite is more often the true. Their bigger problem is when they DO NOT listen to, trust, and follow their hearts. If we lost faith in our hearts and our good judgment, it is not too late to begin trusting again.

The impact of disconnection from heart can be disconnection from ourselves, the beauty of our world, nature, diversity, and individual human souls. It can take us from the joy that comes from living and being in the present. Other consequences of failure to notice, listen, and follow heart include: loss of self-respect, Loss of integrity, living in fear and avoidance, loss of clarity, direction, purpose, and vision, lack of self-confidence, and a decrease in the depth of meaningful relationships with others.

The heart is “multifaceted” in its contribution, and thus, the effects of listening to and following the heart is also multifaceted and brings different blessings to those “attuned” to it. These “expressions” and “experiences” of “hear” are not limited to, but include the following:

- 1) The compassionate heart
- 2) The creative heart
- 3) The courageous heart
- 4) The wise heart
- 5) The heart of integrity

The Compassionate Heart: This is the experience of loving kindness. When we listen to the heart we can feel love for those we know well, and those we don’t know. That compassion includes acceptance and the willingness to join with the person who is suffering through our vulnerability. We are “with them in their suffering.” This has been well described by Brene’ Brown (2014). Often, not only the giver, but also the receiver has an experience of the heart in which both love and gratitude is reciprocal between the one who gave and the one who received, bringing both to the “receiving end” of the moment. In those moments, heart are touched, and changed for the better. In those moments, we are lifted up.

The Creative Heart: This is a state or experience of seeing and comprehending with our hearts “the beautiful.” This understanding and full acceptance of beauty may occur as a moment of being touched and “emotionally or spiritually moved to tears” while looking a piece of art in a museum, witnessing the birth of a child, or after receiving a homemade birthday card with a couple rough figures and two words sketched out with a crayon. It can be a moment in nature when we truly understand how beautiful this earth really is. We may connect with heart in a moment of creativity in which we draw, write, sing, or build something of great beauty which others might also be touched by. In the creative heart we come to understand what it is that we must create and express.

The Courageous Heart: I believe that all of us have been touched by a courageous heart: A child getting back up on the bike after a scary and bruising fall, a loved one saying “ I am sorry – I made a mistake,” the decision to conceive, bear, and raise a child, facing longstanding shame with a trusted therapist, being the first to utter “I love you” in a relationship, making a stand or doing the right thing

alone and against a tidal wave of disapproval, and taking the first step out of avoidance when we are scared.

The wise heart: The wise heart may sound something like this: "It just felt right," "I had a gut level feeling about this," "I knew it was the right thing to do," "Feeling good about it-we trusted that it would work out," "When I got honest with myself, I just knew what I needed to do." That experience of being inspired, or being led to know what to do or say, are experiences of the "wise heart." When deliberation comes to decision, when we know what needs to be done without regard to outcome, when commitment is made and internalized, and when necessary sacrifices are sure to follow, the "wise heart" may be at work and it is a beautiful thing. All of the gathering of good information and the advice of trusted others comes together in deliberation, and is given over to "wise heart" for decision. Ownership of decision is embraced, with some measure of confidence, and with a high measure of hopefulness, knowing that the best we can do after all is said and done, is doing that which in our hearts, we feel is the right thing to do.

The Heart of Integrity: The heart of integrity begins with a deep desire to have integrity—to do the right thing, live in congruence with self, live within embraced and accepted principles and values, and to seek traits of character consistent with who we are and who we can become. We embrace this pursuit not only in a key moment of choice, but also as a consistent way of living. In this place of character, we transcend behavior and patterns of living, into the formulation of "being" and "becoming." In this place, our desire to be loyal to embraced principles is more important to us than winning, being right, momentary pleasure, or the short sighted balm of avoidance. In this place we live a life of harmony and good will towards self, others, earth, and higher power.

No matter how much we desire to consistently "listen to heart," we will fall short. Gratefully, however, we can learn through effort, and focus, and practice. We can also help our beloved family members and our clients to do the same. Here a few suggestions which may help to increase our awareness and attentiveness to heart:

- 1) Unplug from all technology for blocks of time each day, for a chance to bring our attention internal versus external
- 2) Spend time in the creative process of the arts: drawing, painting, writing, singing, playing a musical instrument, and listening to music can all bring us closer to heart. When we are creating or enjoying the creations of others, it brings us to "the beautiful," and that brings us closer to heart.
- 3) Spend time in a place of refuge from the noise, clatter, and demands of a busy world. A place that is safe, comfortable, quiet, and peaceful.
- 4) In that quiet place, approach that "alone" or "solo" time with a purpose of "listening for that which I need to hear."
- 5) Spend some time in nature, time with the beauty which the creator hath made, and time away from those things which mankind has made
- 6) Practice rituals which increase connection with self and with higher power: walks in nature, yoga, meditation, ponderance, prayer, mindfulness
- 7) In times of ponderance, reflection, and listening – practice noticing and understanding the differences between the experiences of thought, feeling, and impressions of the heart. Improve your ability to differentiate and honor each of these.

- 8) Consider practicing the small symbolic ritual of placing your hand gently but firmly over your heart as you attend to, listen, ponder, and share with yourself and others, the impressions, messages, understandings, knowledge, and imperatives from the heart
- 9) Approach listening to the heart with a spirit of "openness, invitation, and willingness" to hear and understand, rather than a spirit of "pushing, forcing, or demanding" from ourselves, a connection to the heart. We don't make the heart talk to us, and we don't make ourselves hear a message. We simply invite, attend, and become open to it.
- 10) In times of ponderance, learn to ask questions, and remain available for possible answers. Many questions are possible. A couple examples are as follows: "What do I know in my heart to be true today about me, my family, my purpose, and my spiritual beliefs" "What are the messages of from my heart today about what I need to do, and about that which is of most importance?" "What is it that I know in my heart today that I must do?" "What does my heart teach me today about who I am and about my worth?" "What does my heart tell me about love today?" "What does my heart tell me about gratitude today?" As we ponder a specific question, we can listen for an answer.
- 11) Realize and accept that the messages of the heart come when they come, not when we want or demand that they come. Know that we will have times where we will not feel connected to heart, we may not notice or hear, and that we will leave our moment of desire "empty handed." Remember that all we need to do is come back to it again, and to consistently practice both persistence and patience.
- 12) Remember that "the heart" speaks to us most often in a quiet sway, and in the small and simple things. If we are looking for a loud and vibrant bolt of lightning, we may miss a thousand small yet critical impressions. We may have to "bring out the emotional and spiritual stethoscope" and listen intently to the quiet sounds of the heart.
- 13) Learn, over time, how to tell if the voice we hear, the impressions and understandings we experience are from our hearts, versus a different source. This can be tricky at times to tell the difference between heart and ruminative thought, or heart versus emotion. However, I would suggest as a starting point: We can at least know that if the message is not kind, compassionate, uplifting, encouraging, affirming, and hopeful – then we can know that it is not from the heart. Even when a message is instruction on what we need to change, if it is from the heart, it will be respectful and kind. Practice will gradually teach us that this voice of heart is different and that while discernment is not perfect, we can learn to become better knowing the source.
- 14) The messages of the heart can become a "replacement language" as we learn to refuse to listen to the "negative mind" and the trash talk of eating disorders and other emotional illnesses.
- 15) Learn to expect that messages of the heart will come, and learn to be open to them. That "positive anticipation" can help with noticing.
- 16) Developing a language about the heart in writing and in conversation can help us with being attentive to it. Examples of such language are: "My heart says...", "I know in my heart...", or "To be true to my heart ..."

Once we have listened to, and received understanding from our hearts, the next opportunity is to "follow the heart." That is, we honor the message and embracing it by active acceptance or by living truths learned, following through, taking action, integrating it into our live by application one step at a time. The following are suggestions which may help in taking a step from "listening" to "Following" or "living."

- 1) We first must have the desire and an intention of following through with heart messages, whether the message is simply to “accept” or “know” something, or whether the message is to “do” something.
- 2) Writing down in a personal journal those things we learn and understand from the heart is an important step with “taking it forward.” This is true whether the message is just an affirmation of our love for someone, or whether it is an imperative to change something in our life. Writing it down is a witness to us of our intention to follow the heart
- 3) When we ask in ponderance, questions of the heart, we can write down the answers that come to us in the form of “impressions” or “understandings.
- 4) Some heart messages are about “being,” while others may be about “doing”. If there is a message about doing, then make a commitment about making a change to yourself, higher power, and another person close to you. Include a few specific steps you are going to take in that pursuit. Commitments and promises are empowering because they bring our integrity into play as a source of strength for us.
- 5) Share with trusted and loved family and friends, what you know in your heart . Do so in the spirit of true sharing of self. As you “take a stand,” and “declare your truth” quietly to yourself and out-loud to others, your clarity around those beliefs may increase.
- 6) If messages of the heart include love and gratitude, then follow through on those impressions with a full and vulnerable expressing to those to whom those feelings apply. Vulnerable expression unconditional love is a message of the heart and a spiritual experience.
- 7) Feel and express gratitude for gifts from the heart which you receive. Gratitude is also a gift from the heart and in my opinion, a spiritual experience. When gratitude is shared with those for whom we feel grateful, they too may experience a moment of the heart.
- 8) Create a plan to act on messages which require action, and take small steps towards your intended desire or goal
- 9) If you fall short in taking the kind of steps you desire, then simply try again. When we fall we must quickly get back in the saddle We must let go of our desire to judge or punish ourselves, but rather, learn from the experience and then keep walking without looking back.
- 10) Most often, we must not wait too long to take a step. Sometimes waiting gives time for fear to grow, and sometimes, in the waiting, we can forget what we need to do and the importance of it. Part of honoring the heart is to step forward.
- 11) Create symbols or markers which will remind us of what we know, who we are, and what we must do. Remembering that which is important opens the door for us to follow the heart

We can all develop in increased ability to notice, attend, listen, illuminate, understand, and know our hearts and the messages which come from there. We can likewise learn to have faith in, accept, embrace, follow, and become loyal to the heart.

Surely, we all have many stories of when did not listen, honor, and follow the heart, and what the consequences of those choices were. Let us not persevere nor judge ourselves on these. That is the human condition. The blessing in this pursuit is that perfection is not necessary, and that potential for learning from experience and moving ahead is great.

Likewise, we all have many stories, mostly “seemingly small events” or moments, where in a “key moment” of choice, we felt impressed to choose the better path, and it made a difference in our life, or the lives of another. These experiences are so common, that we become desensitized to them, and miss the ongoing nature of the heart in our daily lives.

Now, back to the story of the phone call and the young teenager who lived, and then came on a wilderness survival trip. That would have seemed like any other day in the life, trying to help another teenage youth as a high school counselor. But that day became so much more, because while sitting in the dirt in the Escalante Wilderness in Southern Utah, a conversation between a wonderful but struggling young woman and a high school counselor, revealed and illuminated the truth that "Two hearts were speaking that night – and thankfully – two individuals were listening." Common life experience is often underappreciated or even unnoticed, until events and reflection call us to a greater understanding.

As we personally become more acquainted with, and more loyal to our hearts to help guide us in our lives, let us help our clients, family members, and good friends do the same. If and when others come to us for help and support let us give them what we have for them, without hesitation, and become engaged in their lives with the intent of kindness and service. And within that constructed frame of guidance, may we also teach them how to teach themselves, and learn from themselves. Let us teach them to go "on the inside" - to learn wisdom and receive guidance in their lives. In this way, we not only "give them a fish," but we "teach them how to fish." Learning to seek, find, listen, follow, and honor the heart is one way they can help themselves plow the difficult fields of life, walk the pathway to recovery from illness, and enjoy the best that life has to offer.

The potential for recovery is real, and internal peace is available. Listening to the heart is one important pathway to those worthy dreams.

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