

These two excerpts come from Mary Rose O'Reilley's (1998). *Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice* (pp. 11, 21). While she's speaking to teachers, her ideas about deep listening and deep reading are equally applicable to students.

Maybe we can keep our students from getting sick. Today's writing assignment: draw the shape of a crow as it would look if it were flying over you. Nobody can. Well, that's a hard one, but if you cannot do it today, surely you will be able to do it tomorrow—because you will have done some research. Tell me, then, something very precise and concrete that you saw today in the external world. Quick now, no peeking. OK, peek. A yellow sneaker. That's grand. So much depends on it.

This moment is the only moment, this sneaker the only sneaker. As Annie Dillard put it in one of her more ecstatic moments in a writing class: "Is this what we live for? I thought; is this the only final beauty: the color of any skin in any light, and living, human eyes?" (1988, 151). The writer's moment—Buddhism aside, belief aside—is Now. Here is James Wright's moment:

Over my head, I see the bronze butterfly,
Asleep on the black trunk,
Blowing like a leaf in green shadow.
Down the ravine behind the empty house,
The cowbells follow one another
Into the distances of the afternoon. (1961, 16)

One of the many things I learned from the Buddhist writer Natalie Goldberg was how to help students pay attention to material like this. Read it aloud, she advises, and then "do a recall." What color was the butterfly? The trunk? The shadow? Where is the empty house? To what moments was the writer awake?

And as students read their own work to each other, we can ask them to recall. When was the writer awake? Do you remember *anything*? (If not, that tells us something about the piece—or about the quality of the listening.) Were there trees, or evergreens, or *blue spruce*? One of my advanced writing students this semester wrote a deeply felt, but rather generic, piece on the death of his father. Another student gently commented: "Jason, I'd like to come away with a better sense of who your father was, how he's different from my dad." Jason returned with a funny piece on a trip he took to the cabin with his seventy-three-year-old father. He never mentioned death, but gave us instead the details of packing the car, the blankets, "Barbie-doll pink, fuzzy like a bad crew cut." He gave us what his father wanted in the cooler: "Sauerkraut, pickles, loaf of bread, that blue container, a can of carnation milk, jam, no not that jam, the other one."

Similarly, I practiced the discipline of deep listening for a long time before I realized that it, too, was a branch of contemplation. Like all contemplative disciplines, it deals with the whole rather than with the parts: it attends not to the momentary faltering but to the long path of the soul, not to the stammer, but to the poem being born. It completes the clumsy gesture in an arc of grace. One can, I think, listen someone into existence, encourage a stronger self to emerge or a new talent to flourish. Good teachers listen this way, as do terrific grandfathers and similar heroes of the spirit. The critical hearer, by contrast, crushes our spirits, leaves us with that sense of inner defeat Henri Nouwen speaks of.

Brenda Ueland understood well this contemplative dimension of listening. "In order to learn to listen," she tells us,

here are some suggestions: Try to learn tranquility, to live in the present a part of the time every day. Sometimes say to yourself: "Now. What is happening now? This friend is talking. I am quiet. There is endless time. I hear it, every word." Then, suddenly, you begin to hear not only what people are saying, but what they are trying to say, and you sense the whole truth about them. And you sense existence, not piecemeal, not this object and that, but as a translucent whole. (1992, 109)