Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Call

Peter Clothier · Friday, September 17th, 2010

*Our society has no clear path for artists to follow. In the first of an occasional series, writer **Peter Clothier** shares his perspective.*

It was after giving a TEDx talk at Fullerton College last week that I was approached by a very sincere young man who had recently finished his bachelor's and was embarking on a master's degree, but still felt lost and without direction in his life. He had responded in some deep way to my talk about "Heeding the Call," but was unsure what was calling him, or how to go about finding what that call might be.

In my experience, there are two ways to go about the task. Both are of necessity inner processes, but they are quite different in practice. The first is to allow the inner voice to arise from the silent space of meditation. More about that later. The second is a noisier, more dramatic and often painful approach: to check out the messages, and often the wounds we received in the course of childhood to see to what extent they still control the patterns of our adult life. I believe that we will be better placed to find the purpose of our life if we manage to get back to what I think of as our personal Eden, a time and space before the loss of innocence, when we are still one with the universe and with ourselves. What separates us from the clarity of that early innocence is everything that we have learned to understand and believe about ourselves since we were ejected from that Eden by the realities of the external world.

Both paths have been critical to me in learning to listen to the call. It happened that I took the second before arriving at the first. By the time I reached my adult years, I was so heavily armored against the external world that I needed to be literally cracked open before I could begin to see what was there, inside, beneath all the armor that protected me. This cracking open can happen in a variety of ways. For some, it might be a sudden confrontation–with mortality, say. For myself, it came about because, after a long academic career, I found myself out in the cold, jobless and floundering. I had known since an early age that I wanted to be a writer; I just didn't know what I was supposed to write.

It was one of those moments when everything in life seems to be falling apart and I was led, through a series of accidents and epiphanies, to a men's training weekend so intense and challenging that I could no longer hide from myself. I arrived, as someone said later, "shrink-wrapped." I left with my armor in shreds, finally ready to take a good look at myself, the wounds of the past, and the consequent reactive patterns that too often controlled my actions and restricted my potential. I could have done this, certainly, more slowly and more comfortably on a therapist's

couch. But that was a path I had avoided—indeed, had mocked—in my earlier years. Importantly, in the years that followed that initial weekend, I sat weekly in a circle of men who never failed to hold my feet to the fire when I sank back into old, destructive patterns.

Not everyone needs this kind of shock treatment. Not everyone responds to it, if offered. And there is also the other, gentler way, the first path I mentioned—to which, for me personally, the door was opened by that challenging weekend. Because the spiritual path, too, was something I had avoided—and indeed mocked—earlier in life. I was aware of the traditions of meditation back in the 1960s and 1970s, but chose in those days to dismiss them as a rather silly fad, beneath my dignity as a rational man who despised almost anything that smacked of religion. To my intellectual self, "Transcendental Meditation" sounded, well, airy-fairy; and "Be Here Now" seemed too obvious to be worth mentioning… Once having rejected my Church of England upbringing, I was past all that. Or, truthfully, "above it."

Until the pain became too great. Until life itself caught up with me and shook me firmly by the shoulders, insisting that I finally learn to pay attention. Dis-armed, open, even vulnerable, I was emboldened to learn to sit in silent meditation and take that path into the as yet unexplored inner spaces of my mind. Some find this path sooner, and with far less inner turmoil than I did. I honor them. For me, the late discovery of silent meditation and the gradual development, over the years, of a sustained practice led not only to a greater serenity in the face of life's vicissitudes but also—an added benefit—to the disciplined and rewarding writing practice that I follow to this day.

Sitting daily in meditation gives me the opportunity to be, and stay, in touch with what's happening in my mind—the most powerful tool I have at my disposal. It allows me to stay focused on what it is I need to do at any given moment in my life, what new direction I might need to take, and what part of me I can perfectly well leave behind because it is no longer useful or needed. It is the most valued and important tool in my creative life, and the one which is invariably useful, invariably at hand. I can take with me anywhere. It never fails me.

That confused young man who approached me was one of many. I myself was in that place—and stayed there for too many years, continuing to struggle with the demands and distractions of the world. Given the practical need to make our way in the world, there are no easy or right answers for creative people. But I have learned, at least, that it's vital to keep going within to ask those fundamental questions about who we are and what we're given to do; and that the happiest among us are those who manage to be the most completely and authentically themselves.

Peter Clothier is a recovering academic whose blogs The Buddha Diaries and Persist: The Blog are now widely read. His most recent publication is Persist: In Praise of the Creative Spirit in a World Gone Mad With Commerce.

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