

Heard, Half Heard

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*These are the first days of fall.
The wind at evening smells of roads still to be traveled,
while the sound of leaves blowing across the lawns
is like an unsettled feeling in the blood,
the desire to get in a car and just keep driving.
A man and a dog descend their front steps.
The dog says, Let's go downtown and get crazy drunk.
Let's tip over all the trash cans we can find.
This is how dogs deal with the prospect of change.*

*But in his sense of the season, the man is struck
by the oppressiveness of his past, how his memories
which were shifting and fluid have grown more solid
until it seems he can see remembered faces
caught up among the dark places in the trees.*

*The dog says, let's pick up some girls and just
rip off their clothes. Let's dig holes everywhere.*

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Above his house, the man notices wisps of cloud crossing the face of the moon. Like in a movie, he says to himself, a movie about a person leaving on a journey. He looks down the street to the hills outside of town and finds the cut where the road heads north. He thinks of driving on that road and the dusty smell of the car heater, which hasn't been used since last winter.

The dog says, Let's go down to the diner and sniff people's legs. Let's stuff ourselves on burgers. In the man's mind, the road is empty and dark. Pine trees press down to the edge of the shoulder, where the eyes of animals, fixed in his headlights, shine like small cautions against the night. Sometimes a passing truck makes his whole car shake.

The dog says, Let's go to sleep. Let's lie down by the fire and put our tails over our noses.

But the man wants to drive all night, crossing one state line after another, and never stop until the sun creeps into his rearview mirror. Then he'll pull over and rest awhile before starting again, and at dusk he'll crest a hill and there, filling a valley, will be the lights of a city entirely new to him.

But the dog says, Let's just go back inside. Let's not do anything tonight.

So they walk back up the sidewalk to the front steps. How is it possible to want so many things and still want nothing. The man wants to sleep and wants to hit his head again and again against a wall. Why is it all so difficult? But the dog says, Let's go make a sandwich. Let's make the tallest sandwich anyone's ever seen.

*And that's what they do and that's where the man's
wife finds him, staring into the refrigerator
as if into the place where the answers are kept –
the ones telling you why you get up in the morning
and how it is possible to sleep at night,
answers to what comes next and how to like it.*

That's a poem by Stephen Dobyns. Every poem should have a dog in it – just to keep it honest.

*staring into the refrigerator
as if into the place where the answers are kept –
the ones telling you why you get up in the morning
and how it is possible to sleep at night,
answers to what comes next and how to like it.¹*

What's that blank stare about? What does it look like? You know the hungry stare into the fridge, right?

What about the impulse of the dog versus the mind of the man. The dog's view – simple, clean, bodily – and impulsive – *this is how dogs deal with the prospect of change*. The man seems so romantic, wanting this and that and the other thing, thinking, facing change by creating movies in his mind, scenarios to wish away the change. Thinking, thinking, analyzing – but having little relationship to his bodily impulses and staring into the fridge ... *as if into the place where the answers are kept*.

And why doesn't the guy seem to hear the dog? To me, the story doesn't really have an ending or an answer, but it does a great job of spinning out a version of what I have dealt with all my life in the face of change – mind or body, analytical or impulsive?

What comes next and how to like it? How do you deal with the changes of these days? These, the first days of a fall that you have looked forward to, maybe feared, maybe relished for a long time. How do you deal with the changes of these years at college?

I sat where you are sitting 24 years ago and I had little clue where I would end up. I never imagined that I would be a theatre director – never had that in my dream script, honestly. When I went to college, an ultra-conservative undergraduate college (figure that one out), it informed me who I really am and who I am not. The

thing that I did not know going into college was how much I would change, and I could never have imagined those changes or even really seen them coming.

Navigating through the changes of your college journey has to do with hearing things, listening, and looking for things you don't always hear or see – things both inside and outside of you, but there is lots of noise covering up your hearing and your vision.

T.S. Eliot wrote in “The Four Quartets”–

*Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.
heard in the midst of the rocking changes happening all around
you.*²

Maybe what comes next and how to like it is not a matter of staring hard into the refrigerator until an answer magically appears. It's in finding a new way to look and to listen. Allow me to give you a few new ways to look and listen your way through the changes of what comes next for you. There's more in every idea, every space, every piece of art, every person than what is in front of you. A collection of knowledge resonates from every situation.

The first new way is to look and listen to learn to love complexity and mystery. Look at this theatre. You might say, so what, it's a theatre. Simple – people in seats, a stage. But it comes from a tradition of Italian renaissance theatres, ones with fairly decadent proscenium arches, naked cherubs, angels with trumpets and such. Ah, but this would not suit the rather demure and humble spiritual architecture of the German Brethren tradition upon which this college was founded. Hence there is little or no ornamentation. What little ornamentation there is actually is behind the audience and where the organ pipes live. Why ornament the organ pipes? Think of the German tradition of music – Bach, Brahms, Beethoven – need I go on? These are trusted and accepted German artists. Some of them wrote hymns. So here is where ornamentation feels comfortable. A collection of knowledge resonates from this theatre.

When I first walked into this theatre, I felt right at home. I was raised in the Brethren tradition. I recognized the pragmatic lines, the modest nod to the arts, the simple, nearly Quaker reverence of the

windows. And you might think that I would prefer a more ornate theatre. Absolutely not. This theatre speaks not only to the founding culture of this institution, but also to the culture of Huntingdon, and central Pennsylvania. It also speaks to my love of theatre that comes off the stage simply and directly – empty space, full bodies – and of my belief in a humble approach to art-making.

These sorts of intriguing messages are everywhere if you learn how to look for them. A collection of knowledge resonates in every field of study, every academic discipline. There's a funny notion in higher education. And you might as well start questioning it now. It has to do with the notion of disciplines as separate and distinct fields. I am a chemist. I am a writer. But why is it that the geniuses of every field inevitably follow their pursuits straight across the boundaries of every discipline? Take, for example, Leonardo da Vinci – designer, architect, artist, mathematician, writer, or engineer? Learn to love complexity and mystery and follow them straight across the artificial boundaries of academic disciplines.

Maybe we are so caught up with the notion of disciplines because we like the labels. Labels make things simpler for us – less complex. We want to believe this – if I am studying chemistry there ought to be a set of answers that I can learn and then I will be a chemist. If I am studying writing, someone smarter will tell me how to do it and I will someday be a writer. It's an easy trap to fall into – and dead wrong.

We do it with people too. Look around you. Or if you don't want to, simply remember some of the people you saw on the way in here. Maybe a professor, maybe a classmate. Or look at this collection of complex and mysterious people in front of you on this stage. You have started to categorize people in your own mind. It's a myth that we choose to play by all the time. If I can categorize you as an athlete, a sci-fi loving computer head, a math professor, a college president – I can think I know who you are and avoid the complex mysteries of you. I can treat you as your label and that's that.

But let's do each other a favor. Let's get flexible about our labels, or at least let's get flexible about our assumptions that we know what's behind the label. So I won't think of you as whatever derogatory freshman slur comes into my mind if you don't think of me as whatever your image of a wacko theatre professor is. Neither of us is either of those labels. There's a collection of knowledge behind

every situation, every person. Learn to love complexity and mystery. We need distinctions, clear boundary lines, to keep our lives simple. But what if you allowed yourself to approach people, or ideas, or whole academic disciplines, as mysteries? And studying them might partially reveal, or partially open, more and more mystery. It's the beauty of a rounded liberal arts education that crosses academic fields. It's good luck for you that you chose Juniata.

This notion of a liberal arts education is about living an artful life, not just finding a job. And it's about presence; really, becoming more present, more aware, more here, more mindful in your living, your play, your work. Presence is being here fully, seeing more of what's here. And presence has to do with the body as much as with a state of mind.

So the second new way of looking and listening is experiencing your body as a source of knowledge. In western culture, the body is, in the words of T.S. Eliot, *not seen because not looked for*. Not even half heard. Certainly not trusted.

College is a place to get smart. But are there smarts in the body? In your body's experience? Simply start to pay attention to your body, its impulses, its desires, its breathing, its nuance, its intelligence. There's a realm of understanding there. You might be thinking now, okay, that's weird. It's too strange for me. Let me suggest that it's strange because we do not honor the body in our society – and we are out of practice. But let me also suggest that you already know this body awareness thing is true, somewhere in you, you know that it is true.

Ever find that ideas flow better after moving around a bit? Ever notice that your vocabulary seems to increase after you dance? You become wittier, and words are easier to find? It's maybe a great reason to dance when you go out with someone. Ever see a rapper stand still when rapping? Is it body influencing the formation of language? Language as embodied or language as thought? Is it both? Ever walk into a room and have a strange bodily experience that something is not right? Try that sort of thing through only thinking. One of my favorite authors, Mary Oliver, wrote, "If the world were only pain and logic who would want it?"³ You know this too, right?

Ever think so hard about a decision that it hurts, your body literally feels stuck in quicksand? Trying to find the "perfectly logical solution" to whether to break up with someone will produce pain

and logic. Who wants that world? Learn to know what your body is telling you.

So let's just stop for a second and find out what we are aware of. The first level is sounds, the easy senses. The sight, smell of the room or the person next to you, or you. Temperature. And so on. But now become aware of other bodily impulses. There's a tightness in you somewhere? Do you know where it is? Don't do anything with it. Maybe it's homesickness, maybe it's wanting this speech to end, maybe it's the barrage of new experiences, maybe it's the weirdness of being asked to notice what your body is experiencing (we are all out of practice at this, right?). Maybe it's the simple fear that you are not going to be accepted here somehow. Whatever it is, find its measure in your body.

Maybe there's an energy that you can feel in your body, a place opposite the tension. Maybe you noticed someone on your way in, someone you would like to get to know better. Maybe you like being here at college, in this new life. I think it's probably the "noticing someone" thing. Do you want a minute or two to stay with that one? All that I am suggesting to you here is that your body is a terrific register and measure for each point in your path. Listen to it, pay attention to it.

And as you listen to your body, you might want to remember that your body will record and remind you that this path through college is filled with stress and bumps. No one told me that college would be stressful. I thought it would be a big, old, independent joyride. The movie *Animal House* came out the summer I went to college. I wish I had known that I would be facing more difficult stresses, shifting self-identities and life changes than any toga party could help – not that it wasn't fun. I just did not expect the heat of change to be so hot. An old friend once told me that "a broken heart feels medical." She broke my heart. But it's true I think. Reality shifts and our bodies record it all. Listen.

We, our culture, have a notion that, to readjust our identities, to break our previous molds and castings of ourselves is just dangerous and rather stupid at any rate. You will find this when you go home and tell your parents that having started out as a biology major you now want to study history, only to find that you love throwing pots in the next semester.

You are weaving the strands of your life here. It does not always

happen smoothly and it takes the heat of change to temper and mold who you are.

M.C. Richards talks in her book *Centering* about the extreme stresses of change.

I think it is structural, this necessity of ordeal by fire. The physics of transformation requires it. For structural changes in the moral form of a person are alchemical changes, producing alterations in pulse, breathing and circulation. They are bodily changes, and nowhere may we experience so absolutely the oneness of the world as in these alterations of body-consciousness wrought permanently by inner growth. Symptoms of growth may look like breakdown or derangement; the more we are allowed by the love of others and by self-understanding to live through our derangement into the new arrangement, the luckier we are. It is unfortunate when our anxiety over what looks like personal confusion or dereliction blinds us to the forces of liberation at work. It takes courage to leave the nest or the tribe; sometimes we have the good fortune to be pushed out or to fall out.⁴

Your journey through your college days is your own and you will experience the triumphs and stuck times and heartbreaks in your body. Lyrics never quite sound right quoted without music, but Canadian singer songwriter Bruce Cockburn wrote:

*I learned as a child not to trust in my body
I've carried that burden through my life –
Still there comes a time when we all have to be pried loose.⁵*

This last one may seem like the simplest, but it actually may be the hardest thing to learn: how to listen for and how to decipher what you love, how to pay attention to it and ultimately how to love what you love. How to walk your path, not the paths others would have you walk; your own, strange and magnetic path.

Think now, if you could do anything, anything, without regard to what other people in your life would have you do, what might it be? You might think that you would just collapse into a lazy heap, watch TV constantly and eat Cheetos. Okay, this is not the time to try that, starting a new school year. But imagine with me for a

moment that you could just do anything you wanted. Eventually wouldn't you want to learn something? Wouldn't you become curious, maybe even motivated?

Look, eventually in your life you will come up against your own heart's desires. And you will either be following them or you will not. Remember,

*Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.
heard in the midst of the rocking changes happening all around you.*

You might as well start looking and listening toward what you love now. It can be a long journey.

You have a whole group of terrifically skilled, knowledgeable and relatively likable humans in Juniata's faculty ready to help you find this path.

When you find that thing you love, maybe in ten years, maybe tomorrow in your first class, maybe in forty years, hopefully it can be a part of your working day. If so, time will pass effortlessly. You will be tempted to say, it's not a job! It's what I love to do. But what you love is your life's work. Your life will likely not look like the career track that most of us imagine. I study biology and then I am a biologist or a doctor. And that's it.

And while we're at it, can we all just agree that you don't need to know what you are going to do with your life at eighteen or twenty-two or thirty even. It's a long and winding process for most of us. The hard part is that what you love may not fit the definitions of what others would have you love. This will not be easily resolved in your life. But it will be a big part of your life's education. And you will have to make some peace with it eventually. I promise you that. Look and listen for what you love, pay attention, and then love what you love.

I will close with a bit of the strangest poem about love that I know of. It's strange because it tells nothing of the romantic images that we generally dream up about love. No, it is much truer than that.

The poet Annie Dillard wrote this poem in response to a famous British literary critic's decree that a person can only write a love poem about ordinary things that everyone can experience. Annie

Dillard disagreed with this guy's literary law and wrote a love poem about a man who loves wood. He loves wood so much that he fantasizes about eating wood, specifically mahogany. The poem is essentially about the deep mystery of love.

The Man Who Wished to Feed on Mahogany

*That there should be mahogany, real, in the world,
instead of no mahogany, rings in his mind
like a gong...
reality rounds his mind like rings in a tree*

*He wishes, cool in his windy rooms. He thinks:
of all earth's shapes, her coils, rays and nets,
mahogany I love, this sunburnt red,
this close-grained, scented slab, my fellow creature.*

*He knows he can't feed on the wood he loves, and he won't.
But desire walks on lean legs down halls of his sleep,
desire to drink and sup at mahogany's mass.*

*His wishes weight his belly. Love holds him here,
love nails him to the world,*

*Is he sympathetic? Do you care?
Look at the world, where vegetation spreads
and peoples air with weights of green desire.
Crosses grow as trees and grasses everywhere,
marking the map, "Some man loved here;
and one loved something here; and here; and here."⁶*

As you go through your days and years here, you might imagine looking at this campus, the actual place, as a map full of marks where lots of students who came before you heard their heart's desire, a way to go forward with their lives. And you might imagine adding your own mark on the place, you as mahogany man – wishes weight your belly ... love holds you here ... marking the map ... I loved something here; and here; and here. I found my love here.



NOTES

¹ Stephen Dobyns, "How to Like It." *Cemetery Nights* (New York: Viking, 1987).

² T.S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," *Four Quartets* (New York: A Harvest Book, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1974).

³ Mary Oliver, "Humpbacks," *American Primitive* (New York: Little Brown & Company, 1984).

⁴ M.C. Richards, *Centering* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1989).

⁵ Bruce Cockburn, "Last Night of The World," *Breakfast in New Orleans, Dinner in Timbuktu*. Rykodisc, 1999.

⁶ Annie Dillard, "The Man Who Wished to Feed on Mahogany," *Tickets for a Prayer Wheel* (New York: Perennial Library, 1988).