

Whose Drummer?

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As women, we were taught to observe, anticipate, and relate strongly to the needs of those around us. It is a skill which serves us well - at its best, we can be compassionate, thoughtful and giving. At its worst, we are lost to ourselves. Marching for so long to the beat of another's drum, we no longer hear the rhythm of our own hearts.

Often we don't separate ourselves from our partners, our families and our co-workers. We don't realize that we've lost touch with ourselves until we start getting a little snappy, a bit frustrated, and often resentful of those around us who don't seem to return the favor of attentiveness. The vague dissatisfaction can be dismissed for a while. A voice inside our heads insists that we're making something out of nothing. Perhaps we are expecting too much from our lives. After all, many of us have the material goods or the surrounding trappings of success on some level. Isn't that enough?

But another voice, more insistent, and frustratingly quiet, suggests that there is more. We can drown it out with the noise of activity, amusement, even devotion to something outside of ourselves, each worthy in its own right, but each incapable of soothing the gentle agitation within.

We're faced with a choice. Continue to look everywhere but inside, listen to all but ourselves, and prepare for the battle of a lifetime that may have serious consequences for our mental and physical health.

Or we can begin the frightening and rewarding journey of slowing down, disengaging from our surroundings, and listening to our hearts.

I believe we are born with a certain vocation, a calling which is both a way to

express the core of who we are, as well as a way to serve and give back to others. The psychologist James Hillman calls this our "acorn". It is the essence of who we are, which, if we allow to manifest, can lead to great satisfaction – a feeling of deep joy just for doing what comes naturally to us. In the Dagara tribe of Burkina Faso in West Africa, the community passes around a newborn baby in order to "listen" to its calling, so that it can be properly named to reflect its essence and can be guided in the manifestation of its calling. In our society, however, our path is often dictated to us (echoing the notion that children are blank slates to be written upon) rather than "listened to" as something we carry into this world when we are born.

If we are not listening to this calling, if life and those around us have not yet reinforced nor echoed its invitation, we can be left following any tug from the outside world. We then learn to define ourselves and our values by the external environment. How often do people pursue a certain path, often an admirable and acceptable one, only to find themselves years later lost in what seems to be someone else's life? Like Dorothy of the Wizard of Oz, we travel far through sparkling cities, only to find that we ache for home.

So how does one start the process of listening to the heart? Silence and reflection are wonderful keys to ourselves and our core nature. Many have used daily meditation – even for 10 minutes, to quiet the noise in our heads. Some have used walks in nature to reconnect to a rhythm long forgotten. The point is to slow down, disengage, and listen. Let go of the need-tos, the musts and the shoulds. They may put up a fight, as those around you may raise an eyebrow about your self-imposed mini-exile. It will take some practice – years of responding, reacting to others and anticipating may create some resistance to focusing on yourself. But gentle, regular persistence, even if you don't succeed in achieving

silence, will grant you the space you need to pick up the scent of your chosen path.

Another way to access your core is through self-observation. The body is a great communicator of emotion and feeling. Much of what we have lived is recorded in its cells and structure, and even in our overall state of health. Understanding one's own body talk can give early signals as to how we are reacting to the environment. Note how your body feels especially when faced with a challenging person or situation – or when you need to make a decision. By tuning into the language of the body, you can access your own wisdom.

Journaling, artwork, music, dance, acting – any form of artistic expression can be particularly powerful in expanding your horizons and linking you more completely to your core. Skill is irrelevant. Unedited, the flow of creation offers vitality and immediacy – another form of being in the moment. The beauty is in the process, not the outcome.

Are these practices a luxury in a fast-paced world? It depends on what we're pursuing. And that's the crux of it. If we don't know why we are pursuing the path we're on, how can we know it's the best path? If we're living for others first, and ourselves last, all will pay a price as we become increasingly unable to serve.

Alignment with one's calling is a means to abundance – for ourselves and for others. As we dare to step out and speak with our true voice, the voice of our calling, we re-define our world. The environment which once seemed draining starts to provide resources and support. We surround ourselves with people who celebrate us as we truly are, and release those who are unable to do so. We find guidance from our inner barometer. And despite the risks of true authenticity, we dance with joy to the beat of a different drum – our own.

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For further reading:

The Artist's Way at Work, Mark Bryan with Julia Cameron and Catherine Allen (1998, William Marrow & Co.)

The Anatomy of Change: A Way to Move Through Life's Transitions, Richard Strozzi Heckler (1993, North Atlantic Books)

The Soul's Code: In Search of Character and Calling, James Hillman (1996, Random House)

Life Launch: A Passionate Guide to the Rest of Your Life, Frederic Hudson and Pamela McLean (1995, Hudson Institute Press)

The Power of Purpose, Richard J. Leider (1997, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.)

The Congruent Life, C. Michael Thompson (2000, Jossey-Bass Publishers)