

October 30, 2007

It was one of those mornings - arising from too little sleep with too much to accomplish before I needed to be in the office for my first appointment. Walking to the subway, my head was filled with the "noise" of family concerns, people to call, bills to pay, and assignments to complete. This was not a great way to start the day - I could feel the tension in my body. But descending the subway stairs, I began to hear the sounds of a classical guitar amplified throughout the station. The man playing was without a doubt a seasoned artist. I felt my body loosening as my mind and soul were now filled with this beautiful music. I found a seat and closed my eyes. I was uncharacteristically grateful this morning that the train was somewhat delayed - the extra time allowed me more of an opportunity to enjoy the calming beauty of the enchanting sounds of the guitar. My breathing slowed and became more rhythmic. In the cavern known as the New York City subway system I was the recipient of an invaluable gift.

This movement from "noise" to music is the work of renewal. Many of us know, and many of us need to learn, that beautiful music is potentially all around us. Yet, like me on that particular morning, I was tuned out, too busy and overwhelmed with details and concerns to hear it. What we hear instead is dissonance, the harsh jangle created by obligation and life situations not to our liking. Certainly, grief, illness and life disappointment willingly join in to create a chorus of disharmony.

How do we tune into the music, how do we create experiences of renewal? There are so many ways, and none is perfect, guaranteed to continually provide the desired result we are seeking. But even small moments, like my subway experience, can make a significant impact on our outlook.

In this renewal blog, which we plan on updating on the 1st and 15th of each month, we will examine sources of wisdom, contemporary and ancient, that help us to not only hear with different ears, but to see with different eyes.

Dr. Richard Carlson relays a story in *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff* about two workers who were questioned by a reporter, "What are you doing?" The first complained that he was "virtually a slave, an underpaid bricklayer" who wasted his days away, placing bricks on top of each other. The second worker replied, "I'm the luckiest person in the world... I get to be a part of important and beautiful pieces of architecture. I help turn simple pieces of brick into exquisite masterpieces." Carlson comments that "we see in life what we want to see. If you search for ugliness you'll find plenty of it... But the opposite is also true. If you look for the extraordinary in the ordinary, you can train yourself to see it."

It seems to me that the key word in Carlson's statement is "train." Sometimes the music, or the beautiful vision, appears out of nowhere, but more often than not, tuning in grows out of sustained effort to hear and see in new ways. Sometimes it can be so gratifying to stay with the negative, and so comfortable to remain in the narrow confines of our limited purviews. The work of renewal is to train ourselves to let go of the old and habitual.

Mary Oliver, in her poem *When Death Comes*, writes the following:

When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was a bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.
When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened
or full of argument.
I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

R. Benjamin Cirlin, LCSW