

Quietening

For nearly three years, I had been getting up at 5:30 most weekday mornings during the school year to drive to Manhattan. Arriving at the Upper West Side without yet being fully alert, I would get on the subway to Times Square. In that still rather obtunded state, I found the wake-up call for my approaching stop in the ceramic depictions, in primary colors, of the denizens of Wonderland on the walls of the 50th Street Station. Most prominent among them, it seemed to me, were the White Rabbit (curiously enough bright blue with a heart of red), always in a rush, and the Mad Hatter, flying apart at the seams. To pass them by at a clip was to be put on notice that I was once more about to step through the looking glass in order to be reminded that the world is but a mirror of ourselves.

Making my way on foot through Midtown, especially garish in the impact of its sights and smells at that early hour, I would arrive at a loft in the Garment District. This was our classroom, and it was here, eight floors above the cacophony of 38th Street, that we came to learn to turn down the volume on our psychophysical experience and find the stillness at the core.

Now it was summer, school was over until the fall, and I was back in the country and entering a very different teaching space. As I closed the door, I noticed a very curious thing: the birdsong I had barely noticed on my walk there suddenly seemed to have become much louder. It stood out more intensely inside this room, as if there had been some figure-ground aural shift. Was it just some acoustical phenomenon masking ambient road noise? But then there was no traffic in this dead-end street at this hour.

The shift was more likely one of awareness, like the time I had noticed a dozen four-leaf clovers standing out distinctly as if outlined against the suddenly muted lawn. Then there was the evening when the mounting sound of the

beating wings became almost deafening as the doves came in to roost at dusk outside the ruined windows of the Abbaye de Montmajour in Provence. And there was that near-indefinitely prolonged pounding of hooves outside the tents, as time slowed and a herd of elk ran through our camp that night in the backcountry of Yellowstone. Or the sense of stillness inside that archway in the reconstruction of the Roman settlement at Hadrian's Wall in Britain. It was just a sort of shed with spiritual pretensions, open at both ends and decorated with undistinguished pale green frescoes, but somehow it conveyed a profound sense of peace if you stood within.

The phenomena were there all the time, but what altered was our receptivity. The mind was the last to know things. In the ancient Greek language, to know a thing was to experience it directly. Where we would refer to thinking, they thought in terms of feelings, which were inseparable from their bodily manifestations. Sensorially speaking, what we actually detect are only changing patterns of light, texture, pressure, taste, shape, and sound. How we process this input with our minds creates our world and so our lives. Without the mind, the body might have the experience, but we would miss the meaning. But the sensitivity of the mind depends on the body. To perceive the world with acuity, we need to quiet ourselves. In this place, it was happening of its own accord – just hearing that bird made you not want to do anything to interrupt it.