

Listening to the Rhythm of the Heart

BY SUSAN SPALDING

Since the earliest of times, human beings have sought ways to understand and come into harmony with the rhythms and cycles of life. How did the rhythm of one's life fit in with that of the whole?

Our whole state of being is an amazing orchestration of rhythms and vibrations. These processes are mostly unconscious to us, but ensure that our lives continue, as we breathe, eat, think, love, learn, and live. Very often we give little thought to our physical, internal rhythms, or to our mental, emotional, and spiritual ones, until something goes amiss. If we become ill, depressed, or afraid, we describe ourselves as "out-of-sorts" or feel that something is "out-of-whack." Somewhere, our rhythm is off. The heartbeat of our lives, once a steady, predictable rhythm, is now unfamiliar, unsettling.

We live in a world filled with both natural and man-made rhythms. Some are soothing and healing, while others are disturbing, nerve-wracking and stressful. Vibration and rhythm are the underlying secrets of life.

Our first encounter with rhythm occurs when the contractions of labor force us from the safety and security of our Mother's womb into life in the outer world. Rhythm continues to envelop us as we are rocked to sleep in a cradle or in the loving arms of a parent. Perhaps we are soothed by lullabies or children's rhymes and verses. We grow and dance and run and sing and laugh. Life is a joyful rhythm of discovery.

The rhythms of nature remind us of the natural, harmonic state of being that we experienced in childhood--the rhythmic flow of ocean waves, the songs of birds, the swaying of trees in the wind. It is for this reason that many of us long to return to a natural setting, to vacation near the ocean or in the mountains, when the stress of life takes its toll. Unconsciously we want to find our inner rhythm, to feel peace again.

The physical heart is the seat of rhythm in the body. It literally sets the beat for our lives. The heart has a built-in electrical system, and its own natural pace-maker, or rhythm setter. Because the heart supplies life to the rest of the body, its rhythm is absolutely vital to our well-being and essential to life itself.

The physical heart has a corresponding energetic, or spiritual center, referred to as the heart center. The heart center is the keeper of our ideals, our dreams and aspirations. It gives rhythm and purpose to our lives. The heart, the feeling element, gives vitality to our ideas and plans. If you destroy the ideals of a person, organization, or a nation, you have destroyed the heart. The heart feeds life to the whole organism. Every path in life must have a heart.

Idealism, sometimes in short supply today, can be a bridge to the hearts of others, and to the greater part of ourselves. The phrase, "march to the beat of your own drum," means to live by your own inner rhythm, your own blueprint that is unique to you, your heart's desire.

Do you know your heart's desire? A friend told me this story about her son. When he was about five years old, he asked for a puppy. He had allergies, however. They saw a doctor and began treatments for his allergies. He even eliminated some favorite foods. He worked very hard to get over his allergies so that he could have a dog. One day they were dining at a Chinese restaurant. When the son opened his fortune cookie, it read: "You will get your heart's desire." "My puppy!" the boy exclaimed. Shortly after that, he did indeed get a puppy named Max, his heart's desire.

Sometimes as we get older, it is harder to identify our heart's desire. It is more difficult to hear the rhythm of our hearts. The outer sounds and demands on our time command our attention. The passion in our hearts, the sense of mission and purpose, are forgotten or lost completely, and are replaced by a long list of needs that we are busy filling, but which may not be fulfilling us.

The experiences of life can pile layer upon layer of coverings on the heart. Our emotional heart cries with the pain of loss and heartbreak, with grief, sorrow, guilt, and anger. These burdens throw off our natural rhythm, and our walk through life loses its joy and sense of wonder.

When I was in my early twenties, I had completed my college degree, had reached my goal of becoming a teacher, and was married. We had a dog, a cat, and even two horses. From the outside, everything looked complete. But we weren't happy. I knew very little about myself, and even less about him. How could two people who had no harmony in themselves live in harmony with each other?

Eventually we separated. Still unhappy, we got back together. Having learned nothing about the true reasons for our discontent, we finally divorced. The fairy-tale ending hadn't worked out.

Something happened near the end of our time together that broke open something hard and lonely within me. A crack began in the wall around my heart that I hadn't even known was there. At some point in my life, something vital had just gone to sleep within me. I felt as if I were watching life around me, a spectator. I could see that other people seemed to be truly alive and involved with life. I now know that over a period of time, my heart had just closed. Without a heart, there is no love and no joy. We only go through the motions of living.

A stray dog, starving, abused, and pregnant, had started hanging around our home in the country. One day I came home from my day of teaching, and she was lying near our home, surrounded by puppies. They were hungrily nursing from her emaciated body. This sight broke open my heart in a flood of instantaneous wonder and compassion. A love rushed through me that I had never experienced before. She was giving all that she had to her babies, giving them life and love, giving them the little strength she had.

In that moment, for the first time in many years, I understood unconditional, pure divine love. I understood that there existed a type of love that would sacrifice for the beloved. It was as if I had moved inside the dog and knew her life and soul. Life had treated her unkindly; yet, even though fearful of humans, she still wanted to trust and to love. While the universe may have led her there to receive food and care, I believe she was also led there to save me by teaching me about love. I had let pain close my heart. Her pain had only made hers more tender.

Life can catch us unawares, and sometimes in an unexpected moment, one that is undeniably planned by grace, our path opens before us, and we are led by an invisible rhythm that is love. We get another chance to be real, to find the life that we came here to live.

How real are our lives? How connected are they to our hearts? Before beginning this article, I asked some friends to complete these two sentences. I asked them to write down their first reaction, and not to censor their thoughts. The sentences were: "I will be completely happy and fulfilled when _____." "I am waiting for _____." Here are some of the answers:

"I don't know if I ever will be (happy and fulfilled). I am waiting for the other shoe to drop."

"I will be completely happy and fulfilled when I get a million dollars. I am waiting for a million dollars."

"I will be completely happy and fulfilled when I make time for myself. I am waiting for permission."

"I will be happy and fulfilled when I am organized and move into a new house. I am waiting for the inspiration to finish my book."

The answers of some other individuals centered around acquiring an inner state, rather than on outer circumstances or conditions:

"I will be happy and fulfilled when I am able to focus my mind with greater intention."

"I will be happy and fulfilled when I am able to love myself unconditionally. I am waiting for the realization that I am complete."

"I will be happy and complete when I am in a state of love. I am waiting for that state."

"I am happy and fulfilled when I take my next breath. I am waiting for nothing."

How would you complete these sentences? Your conditioned mind might supply one answer, but your heart might give another.

We all have an inner voice, the voice of our true Soul-self. The ability to hear this voice can be cultivated by contemplation and inner quiet. When I am able to hear my true self, it means that my

human consciousness and higher self are in complete harmony and agreement in that moment. This inner attunement makes the communication possible. I have heard people say, "It's so loud in here that I can't hear myself think." That must be what Soul says when the chatter in our minds keep us from hearing the wishes of the inner self, and listening to the rhythm of the heart.

One day my inner voice said: "I am the one I've been waiting for." A great exhilaration filled me. When we can say, "I'm the one I've been waiting for," then life isn't on hold. We stand complete in the moment with life's possibilities spread out before us. We are free to create the life of our choosing. We are our own liberators. The wait is over.

There is a great deal of interest among people today in finding their life's purpose. Recently I was in a discussion with a group of people, and the question was asked, "What started you on your spiritual path?" The answers were interesting. Some were looking for the meaning of life, the answers to life's mysteries. Others wanted to find love. Some were on a quest for truth.

As I listened and dropped down into my awareness to look for the answer to the question, I suddenly realized that I would have said all of those things, but the deeper answer that came was this: I wanted to know that I had value, that my life counted for something. I wanted to know that it mattered that I was here. This was surprising to me. I was looking back over more than three decades of spiritual practice, and suddenly realizing that the initial reason for my quest wasn't anything so lofty as finding God; my quest was to find myself. I had to find value in myself and in my own life, before I could learn to value life itself and seek a relationship of value with others and with God.

What I further realized was that this life of spiritual practice had not only shown me that I matter, that every life matters and has value, but the discovery of the art of co-creating with Spirit has brought added value. Life can be a continual expansion as new areas of interest open, new abilities are revealed, and new opportunities unfold. The heart urges us forward. But our fears can hold us back.

If anything can keep us from hearing the rhythm of the heart, it is fear. We have conscious fears and unconscious fears. While the conscious fears can be hard enough to overcome, the unconscious ones, the ones that lurk hidden away, limiting our joy and freedom, can be almost impossible to identify and release. We can eradicate the influence of these unconscious agreements, or identifications, by replacing them with higher ones. This is where our ideal comes into play. What is your spiritual standard? What are your aspirations, and what provides inspiration?

The only remedy to fear is love. As we cultivate a life of love, and gradually transcend our fears, they must let go their hold. Our desire to be more, to do more, helps us take risks, and our fears lose their power to limit us.

The greatest thing we can do on our own behalf is to cultivate a spiritual practice, a time for daily contemplation. Spiritual contemplation helps us stay tuned to the rhythm of life. Two voices are constantly competing for our attention: the inner voice of our subconscious that carries our fears,

mental patterns and programming, and the outer voice of the world. A daily spiritual practice opens the subtle spiritual centers within us, and clears the channel between the human consciousness and Soul so that we can hear the spiritual voice within.

Listening to the rhythm of the heart means that we are making the effort to cross the bridge from our busy outer lives to the heart of the true self. It is only by this effort that we learn the value, meaning, and purpose of our lives. The rhythm of the heart can show us our uniqueness, and we can relax and cease trying to be someone or something else.

The rhythm of the heart sets the pace of our inner life, and is our connection to the larger rhythms of the macrocosm. It is the rhythm that we can follow back to our own hearts first, then to the heart of God and the heart of life.

Late one afternoon I stopped at the grocery store. As I was walking from my car toward the store, a man was approaching the store in an unusual fashion. He had his arms raised as if he were dancing with an invisible partner. I smiled as I watched him count off the steps and dance his way to the front door. "Did you just leave a dance class?" I called out to him. He said that yes, he had. He was reviewing the new steps while they were fresh on his mind. He wasn't a bit embarrassed that he had been noticed, as if dancing up to the door of a store was the most natural thing in the world. This man wasn't just bringing dance into his life; he was bringing his life into his dance.

This was a most joyful reminder to me. When we take up a spiritual practice, it is not enough to bring contemplation into our lives; we can bring our lives into our contemplation. In this way we begin to bring the natural rhythm of joy, love, and gratefulness into everything we do. We practice moving to the rhythm of the heart rather than to the rhythm of the outer world.

Whenever some memory of past pain or sense of sorrow edges into my awareness, I remember that man dancing his way to the store. He was dancing to his own inner rhythm, to music no one else could hear, and with a partner no one else could see.

Our lives can be that way, a private dance, as we move to an inner rhythm we discover inside ourselves. And as we step out in tune with life, we find others who are walking in rhythm with life also, and sometimes they keep step with us. Other times we like to walk alone for a time. Sometimes solitude is needed to be certain of our steps and to regain our inner rhythm, our connection to the heart.

This is an exercise you can try to find the rhythm of the heart:

Sit with your eyes closed in a quiet setting where you can be comfortable for twenty or thirty minutes. Picture the ocean. See the waves rolling into the shore, then being drawn back into ocean. As the waves come into shore, breath in. As they recede, breathe out. Listen for the sound of the ocean. See the light reflected in the water. As your rhythmic breathing continues, your awareness turns to the subtle rhythm inside you. You may see an inner light and hear a sound, perhaps the sound of the ocean, or a humming sound. In this stillness, in the rhythm of your heart, is the source of love that sustains you, that is you.

The secret of the rhythm of the heart is this: it is the love that you are and have always been. It is your unique pattern and place in the whole of things. It is the living pulse that bridges your humanity and your divinity. The heart can help you remember the life you were meant to live; the life you were meant to love.

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