

Song of the Dark Mind

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By Molly Scott, Ed.D.

In this time of war, with so much suffering around us, how do we become the peace we seek?

Song of the Dark Mind: Tuning up in a Down Time

By Molly Scott, Ed.D.

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing

there is a field. I'll meet you there.

Jalaluddin Rumi, trans. Coleman Barks

We all want to live meaningful lives, serving our world in effective ways. Yet in this dark time we share an urgent question: How do we live in celebration, not despair? In this time of war, with so much suffering around us, how do we become the peace we seek?

Every day we wake up empty and frightened

Don't go to the study and pull out a book,

Take down a musical instrument instead

Let the beauty we love be what we do.

There are a hundred ways

To kneel and kiss the ground.

Jalaluddin Rumi, trans. Coleman Barks

One morning in 13th century Konya, Turkey, Jalaluddin Rumi woke to a world which must have seemed as violent and brutish to him as ours does now to us. How did this Sufi mystic, poet-dancer to God, deal with his desolation and despair? Don't go to the study and pull out a book, he says. Take down a musical instrument instead.

Rumi's counsel still rings across the centuries, not as a polemic against scholarship, but as an invitation to enter another state of being. In difficult times, the way to antidote despair is to become an instrument for that which we seek, tuning ourselves through the pathway of our senses, into a kind of knowing deeper than knowing-about, the province of prophets and poets, mystics and musicians, and available to us now, in every moment. We need to become vessels through which the grace of a new time will flow.

How do we do this? Tuning our minds first requires turning- an intentional shift of focus from thinking to feeling, from the precise structures of neocortical cognition into the sensual soup of the limbic mid-brain. The "new" brain, the neocortex, is where we analyze, strategize, plan, decide. The mammalian brain, also called the limbic system, is where we feel. And it is where we must go when the world around us becomes so fear filled that we lose our sense of connection to ourselves and others.

We must go in. Poet Wendell Berry writes,

To know the dark, go dark.

Go without sight, and find

that the dark, too, blooms, and sings

and is traveled by dark feet and dark wings.

It is into this realm of limbic resonance, this place of knowing past the known, that meditation practice take us, through concentration, imagery, the moment to moment noticing of mindful awareness. The limbic brain is also a realm where all stories are true, again invoked by Rumi in Bark's translation: Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing there is a field. I'll meet you there.

Sinking into the limbic mind necessitates that we let go of old ways of knowing in order to allow new ways to arise- an encounter with the unknown that is often equated with darkness and our fear of darkness. Wisdom texts tell us that the sacred dwells in the dark of the not-knowing mind. In an article called "Carpe Noctem-Seize the Night", Ken Sehested, writes that "it is only from the dark and dangerous shadow of night that guiding light is granted."

This is the shift toward which Rumi guides us in his poetry: go into the sensual, to the feeling rather than the thinking mind. We understand this as a counsel, not to lose our analytical minds but to come to balance with a wider appreciation and application of our human instrument. Indeed, despite the prevailing myth that our rational minds have everything

under control, it is the deep currents of our emotions, our feelings, which move us to action, investing our lives with meaning as well as mystery. The shift we are called to now is from parts to whole, from the precision of digital processing back into the luminosity of analogue awareness. It is in the limbic, mammalian brain that we know that we are part of a resonant community of interdependent beings, not just fractured fragments of thought or idea.

In recent talks in this country the Dalai Lama, spiritual leader of the Tibetan Diaspora, called for just such a turning and tuning of our minds. An erudite scholar, the Dalai Lama also embodies the open-heartedness he teaches, balancing cognition with compassion. We must balance both qualities of mind, he says: cognitive intelligence tempered by the heart wisdom of our emotional intelligence. He counsels us to use our good minds in the service of peace.

This is not just rhetoric. Recent research using neuro-imaging has shown that accomplished meditators routinely circuit potentially negative feelings into positive ones generated in the left prefrontal cortex. Precise and specific techniques of practice over time actually change brain structure, creating a condition of equanimity which overrides negative experiences. The radiant smiles of many Tibetan refugees bear witness to how consistent spiritual practice can illuminate the inner being despite harsh outer circumstance. In this country, mindfulness practice is being used both in therapy treatment and pain management with measurable effect. Substantive changes in brain/body functioning have been documented in studies with people having as little as eight weeks of experience in mind focusing practice. These are significant and heartening findings for the fields of peace education and conflict resolution.

As studies continue documenting concrete ways that we can use our minds to change our brains, they create bridges to ancient modes of knowing and practice which mystics, artists, and poets have traveled for centuries. The works they leave us are like codes, which we understand through the dance of our own mind's experience.

Our "new" brain cries for clarity and clings to structure. The older limbic brain requires letting go into the dark of not knowing, in order to know and be known at layers below conscious cognition. Rilke, in his "Letters to a Young Poet" speaks of...being alone with the unfamiliar presence that has entered us; because everything we trust and are used to is for a moment taken away from us; because we stand in the midst of a transition where we cannot remain standing.

Many of us might use this as a description of the present state of the world. A willingness to be still and listen, to enter a limbic state through meditation, prayer, or simple everyday mindfulness, may be our most powerful antidote to the violence we abhor in the world. As we become more peaceful, like tuning forks aligned to a common note, we radiate this vibration out into the world, resonating with others of like mind whom we may never see.

We enter limbic awareness to inculcate a kind of being-with, which is not possible through the agency of the rational, thinking brain. It is what animals teach us in their embodied presence -the song of the dark mind- and it is what we must bring to the presence of each other to reach the real essence of community.

For it is community we need now, to be with each other and let the deeper knowing that flows like rivers between us, inform the fine discernment of our cognition. The marvelous creative inventions of our neo-cortical intelligence need the grounding of this inner awareness. Be still and know that I am God. We cannot think our way into peacefulness, but perhaps we can feel our way there through the potent, healing dark.

The key is not inaction or passivity but action which flows from what T.S. Eliot calls the stillness between two waves of the sea. The view of the world from the vantage of limbic interconnectedness is a world in which the good persistently arises.

When contemporary poet Mary Oliver tells us in "Wild Geese" to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves, she echoes Rumi's voice, coming to us from the 13th century: Let the beauty we love be what we do he sings. There are a hundred ways to kneel and kiss the ground.

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Molly Scott, Ed.D.LMHC is a poet, musician, educator, and licensed psychotherapist who teaches at Antioch New England, and leads workshops internationally. She can be reached through The Creative Resonance Institute, Charlemont, MA 01339, Ph 413-339-5501.