Deep Listening

How often do you listen to music? I mean *really* listen, as a singular and focused activity. I often listen to music while I'm exercising, driving, performing chores (I don't do chores, I *perform* them, making them a form of entertainment rather than routine drudgery). Listening in this way is wonderful and can help inspire us to push through fatigue, mellow us out to maintain the speed limit or transform a broom into a dance partner. But how often do we put our focus solely on the activity of listening? When we combine listening with other activities, our attention is divided and though we may have moments where the music rises to the forefront of our attention, there are probably many more moments where it fades into the background. Again, it's wonderful to have a soundtrack for our doings but if that's the only way we ever listen to music, there is a great deal that slips through our ear follicles and is lost.

To find out what is lost, you can conduct a simple experiment and one that I believe might not just change how you listen to music but awaken you to a deeply therapeutic activity that you may find yourself returning to again and again out of pure enjoyment. At some point this week, set aside at least 20 minutes, find a comfortable position along with a set of headphones and listen to something of your choosing. It could be familiar and beloved, something you've listened to many times before. It could be something new. It might be energizing and upbeat or mellow and relaxing. Maybe try all these possibilities.

Decent headphones are essential. This will help you have a more absorbing experience and you will be able to hear the low frequencies *much* better (these are often the first soundwaves we lose when ambient noise or poor speakers become a factor). It will be ideal if you can listen on a device that isn't your phone. If it must be your phone, download what you plan to listen to so you can turn off your wifi and silence any notifications, texts or calls. These 20 minutes (or more) are for your uninterrupted pleasure. Consider turning down or shutting off the lights, or maybe light some candles. Try at least in some moments to close your eyes. The less visual stimulation you experience, the stronger your hearing will become.

If you choose to listen to something familiar and beloved - even something you've heard hundreds of times - I'd be surprised if you don't notice something new that

is brought to your awareness. Sometimes I find myself surprised by how certain details have eluded me in the past. If it's something new, you may find your curiosity provoked along with experiencing a thrilling feeling of discovery.

Consider this part of your music practice! In fact, when you feel you need a day of rest from practicing your instrument, this can be a great activity to substitute. And it will absolutely make you a better musician. It is easy to get obsessed with the idea that being a musician is all about *playing* but it is just as much, if not more about *listening*. If we know how to listen, our playing - both individually and with others - will improve. As we learn to become stronger listeners, many other aspects of our lives will improve as well.

Lastly, I have found in my experience that the practice of deep listening is profoundly therapeutic. I often emerge from a deep listening session with a sense of calm, focus and clarity. It is a way of doing my mental laundry. Like most of us, I consume all sorts of information every day in the acts of reading, viewing and of course, listening. The abundance of sources is staggering, even overwhelming. Years ago, I remember a friend telling me he was going to take a break from listening to podcasts for a while because he "wanted to think his own thoughts." That left an impression on me. I enjoy podcasts too but it did make me think about how so much of what we consume is created with the intention of influencing how we think. It is true that sometimes music has an agenda but oftentimes even if it does, it is subtle. Most of the experience is left open to the response and interpretation of the listener. Sometimes it has no agenda other than beauty, catharsis or celebration.

It is easy to get in the habit of using music as a soundtrack to our activities rather than the activity itself. So see what happens if you try the latter. I think you'll be surprised, find great enjoyment and emerge feeling renewed. It may be hard to motivate yourself the first time but much easier after you begin to reap the rewards.

I'm curious: What did you choose to listen to? Did you notice anything new in a familiar favorite? How did it change the experience of listening to something for the first time? How did you feel afterward? Have you already or do you plan to continue the practice?