

connection could never be severed. She could not un-brother him. This is the heart of moving mountains: to plunge into the intimacy of connection and be led by the heart song.

What action arises from emptying out and listening deeply? This unqualified experience, a response unique to you yourself, can only be known by you.

Listen!

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How do you bear witness to the unbearable? Can you trust in not knowing what to do, out of which your own wisdom can arise?

JUDITH:
Older Sister Mirror

“Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who’s the fairest one of all?”

“You think there’s two of you?”

KOAN

After fifteen years of being away, Jane visited her older sister, who lived on the opposite side of the world. A minute or two into her visit, Jane started breastfeeding her baby and talked about the advantages of breastfeeding while traveling. Her sister’s response was immediate and familiar: “Be quiet! You don’t know anything about it.”

REFLECTION

Jane described her shocked reply from all those years ago: *But I do. I have years of experience; my children are alive, rosy, creative, and content. It is you who don’t know anything! How arrogant you are, how dismissive, how judgmental! You have always put me down and been so confident in your superiority.*

Now she laughs at her outrage from long ago, but the question remains: How do we respond when someone speaks down to us, treating us with hostility or condescension? We might reciprocate, or else take refuge in a testy, resentful silence. Or else we might try to circumvent all this unpleasantness by denying what comes up, particularly our own feelings.

This last response is the way many spiritual practitioners choose to go: *It doesn't matter what she says, I'm forgiving her even as she speaks. I'm just letting it go. It's only my ego getting hurt, so it doesn't matter.*

Everything matters. When something grates inside, and we deny it or wish it would disappear, it's like saying that it doesn't matter if my left thumb hurts or the small bone in my kneecap is sore.

The One Body manifests in a twitch of a muscle, the blink of an eye, a scuffed elbow, the metallic taste of vitriol that we swallow down. Nothing is to be rejected. Every moment reveals the One Body in action: a child joyfully eating ice cream, a family killed by a drunk driver, a fish struggling in the sand, a faded rose, a leaf blowing in the wind, or a person belittling me. Seeing this clearly, why respond with judgment, sharpness, or denial?

Nevertheless, some of the most difficult moments of our lives occur when we're reprimanded, blamed, or disparaged. They bring up the old past when we were children being scolded and reproached, and there wasn't much we could do about it. Now we're older—and there still isn't much that we can do about it. We can talk back, we can hide, we can deny our feelings.

Or we can pay attention, set aside our old history of grievances and angers, and be fully present now. When we do that, when we're in the space of not-knowing, we can explore this

challenging and very alive moment with some tenderness and even humor. We bear witness not just to the person admonishing us but also to our own reactions: Notice our body, the eyes dilated with anger, the lips flattened into a thin line of resentment. Notice the person so easily threatened when faced with difference, the unexpected jab, and the quick, aggressive verbal reaction: *But I do know something about it. It's you who knows nothing!*

Some tell you to remember what you have in common: *You're sisters! You're from the same family!* A Zen teacher may suggest that you explore what is beyond opposites and commonality, which is precisely this moment, ripe with dissension, and also of infinite fullness, beyond the taking of sides, beyond the self-justifying and other-vilifying, and also beyond self-abnegation or hiding.

Living the moment in this way is a tremendous act of letting go and dwelling in not-knowing. But can you let go enough to really let go? Can you feel the quivering energy in the room, the vibrancy of the Whole manifesting in two opposing forces, two opposing energies?

"Sell your cleverness," Rumi writes, "and buy bewilderment."⁹

"Be quiet! You don't know anything about it." Funny enough, that's exactly the space we'd like to create, of inquiry and being completely open. What can I say or do that will invite the other person to enter it with me, to let go of a long-held agenda and ask with full-hearted curiosity: *What is happening here? What is this about?* You're not being asked to agree, just to be a nosy visitor who wonders about everything in the house you're visiting, including the disarray in the bedroom and the unwashed dishes in the sink.

We may discover that, in the end, the most intimate thing is not agreement or seeing eye to eye, not even reconciliation and peace, but dropping further and further into *don't know*.

What happens when you have a conversation with a family member you've known all your life? Are you repeating scripts from the past? Do you know what s/he is going to say ahead of time? What does it take to really listen?

MYOGETSU:
Sitting in Silence

*In the midst of the pots and pans,
The demanding day job, the stresses of daily living—
There is a matter of extraordinary wonder.
What is it?*

KOAN

Myogetsu was eager to do more sitting meditation at home. Her husband liked to sit quietly but they did not sit together.

One evening she said to him, "You know, we should sit in meditation together. So much is communicated in silence. Perhaps we can spend fifteen minutes sitting quietly together on a Saturday morning."

"Let's spend two hours!" he replied enthusiastically.

REFLECTION

Myogetsu's life was full of activity: her daytime job, her many grandchildren, her household tasks, and caring for her