

I'm Busy. Go Away!

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I arrive late, but still manage to find a seat in the lounge. As I melt into the large, cushy armchair with a snifter of cognac cradled in one hand the music of the ship's jazz quartet envelopes me. In that moment I can think of nowhere else I'd rather be.

One by one the instrumentalists take turns launching into improvisations followed by applause from the audience. As the set goes on I find myself distracted by the presence of steady motion appearing in my peripheral vision. Turning my head, I observe the rhythmic movements of young man standing nearby who is clearly enjoying the music. The set ends and as I'm leaving the lounge I notice the young man speaking with the musicians. His notably animated hand motions convey a decided enthusiasm as he speaks and I wonder to myself if he is himself a musician.

I find out the next evening in a different lounge on the ship as the quartet's singer invites a guest musician, Chad* to perform a song with them. And indeed, the young man I saw talking with the group the night before comes up, takes his place at the piano and the group performs "Fly Me To The Moon" also known as "In Other Words" written by Bart Howard in 1954 and made widely popular by Frank Sinatra's 1964 rendition. From beginning to end and especially in his improvisation, it is clear Chad is having a blast. But more, he's good and one can tell he's a serious musician. After the set is over a few people, myself included, go over to shake Chad's hand and complement his playing.

A couple of days later, a chance conversation that my husband Kevin and I are having with a couple is interrupted when one of the pair apologizes and interjects that their son is about to be called up to play with the jazz quartet. Turns out Chad is their son and I share that I heard him play a night or two before. Being proud parents they share that he performs regularly with a band and how much he enjoys it. Chad's father is quick to add that Chad is pre-med and it's important to have marketable skills. Later Chad's parents formally introduce him to us and we chat a little bit about music and grad school. Chad speaks enthusiastically about music, but also parrots his father's line about marketable skills which he delivers with significantly less enthusiasm. With a knowing glance his mother seems to sympathize. Another woman seated with us asks Chad what he would choose all things being equal, music or medicine. Without hesitation Chad replies, "Definitely music."

"Some time when the river is ice ask me mistakes I've made. Ask me if what I have done is my life."

Now, I don't know Chad well enough to know what he should do. In fact, no one does, except Chad. What I do know, and what that haunting line from William Stafford's

poem suggests, is that a lot of people are living a life other than their own. Often they're living a life someone else has dreamt for them. It might be a life their parents wanted for them. Or a life corporate America has sold them on and into.

There's an endless line of suppliers... people and institutions ready and waiting to offer or pressure you into life other than your own. We even have a current political candidate who has advocated granting more voting power and other incentives to those who commit to living his apparent dream life.

The sense that one is living a life other than one's own may come over a person suddenly or it may present as a nagging feeling that just won't go away. Perhaps you've experienced it yourself.

It can be unnerving or even annoying. More often than not it is an unwelcome disruption into what we had felt or hoped is a settled if not entirely satisfactory life, prompting many to respond, "I'm busy. Go away!"

But it doesn't go away.

And if by intention we let our guard down, or when our mind stumbles unwittingly into stillness we realize a current is there, as the poet writes, life, our life, flowing beneath the surface waiting to be lived.

I'm convinced one of the reasons stillness, silence, and noise free spaces are so hard to come by in our time is because people are scared to death to acknowledge this current flowing beneath the surface of the lives they are living. Not because they don't want it, but because they don't know how to get to it. For it often seems an invitation to an impossible dream.

And the truth is, it does take a genius.

Now, by genius I don't mean our contemporary understanding of genius as someone possessing a rare talent, ability, or exceptionally high IQ. I'm talking about the original idea of genius, which the spiritual teacher Michale Meade reminds us, "refers to the inborn spirit and natural gifts of each person." "Everyone," Meade says, "has a genius nature and something essential to give to the world." I have a genius nature and so do you. So does our friend Chad, the pre-med student and musician. And yes, so does the plucky little plunger who wants to be a vase in our story for all ages.

But how do figure out our genius?

Well, we don't. Instead, we awaken to it. Taking a cue again from William Stafford's poem, "Ask Me", the writer and spiritual teacher, Parker Palmer advises, "Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you. Before you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to, let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent."

By now you may be getting the sense that for all our heroic talk as human beings of seizing destiny, shaping the course of our lives, and forging our own path, it is actually the other way around. We don't choose our life. Our life chooses us.

We get to our genius by choosing the life that chooses us.

Still, in an age where we're taught to be practical, weigh pros and cons, make rational decisions, and favor efficiency above all else, choosing the life that chooses us is easier said than done. It's not that there's anything wrong with those favored tools of decision making, it's simply that they're not enough. For life speaks a language the ancients knew well, but we moderns largely dismiss, that of the inner life.

Unlike an app on our phone that provides detailed door to door directions, warning us of speed traps, and suggesting alternative routes when traffic is stopped, life communicates through things like intuition...stirrings and... feelings, things that know nothing of certainty, but require faith. For life, like the "Lord whose oracle is at Delphi", according to Heracleitus, "neither indicates clearly nor conceals, but gives a sign."

An indeed, to choose the life that chooses us we need to leave open the possibility the idea that an event, interaction, experience, or outcome is nudging us toward or away from something. The trick is to hold such things with curiosity, to allow them to speak while resisting the temptation to impose a concrete interpretation on them.

The ancient Greeks spoke of daimons, intermediaries between the gods and humans, a guiding spirit, if you will, assigned at birth connecting heaven and earth. These daimons, like similar beings in other religions, are not to be understood as having a physical reality, but rather to represent, in the words of another writer and spiritual teacher Thomas Moore, "something that is real for all of us: a sense of destiny, vocation, or direction."

And vocation, Moore points out, "comes from the Latin word vox, voice. A vocation is a call", which Moore describes as, "A sensation or intuition that life wants something from you." Likewise, Parker Palmer observes, "Vocation does not mean a goal that we pursue. It means a calling that we hear."

A calling is the silent sound of the current flowing beneath the surface of the life we're living. When the two are aligned we've tapped into our genius.

The challenge, as always, is as D.H. Lawrence wrote, "to recognize and submit to the gods" within... That is, to invite the voice of vocation or our calling in and to submit to it, to listen to what it is saying to you specifically, rather than attempt to shape or conform it to an external, abstract idea about what you should do.

For a call or calling might point or draw one person toward a specific career or career change where they may awaken to and share their genius. Other times one's job plays a supporting role in answering one's calling. Such was the case with Wallace Stevens, who, by his own admission, "Didn't like the idea of being bedeviled all the time about money..." Stevens worked as an insurance executive by day, wrote poetry in his spare

time, and became one of America's greatest poets. A story Chad's father, who admires his son's musical talent but worries about his ability to make a living might be relieved to hear.

Of course, a calling may also pull you into two seemingly different directions, sewing confusion or concerns about becoming fragmented. Contemporary notions of wholeness play into this by equating being whole with achieving and maintaining a life of limited or singular focus. Recognizing this, the noted depth-psychologist James Hillman advocated a poly-centric approach in which we learn to appreciate and attend to the many interests that seek our attention.

I can see now that I stumbled into this approach with my own callings and subsequent careers concerning art and ministry, two vocations that to many seem barely related, if not opposed to each other on the surface of things. But in attending to each they have in fact enlivened and deepened my experience and practice of both. And perhaps Chad will forge a poly-centric path with music and medicine.

The reality is our callings, like the genius to which they guide and awaken us to, are as unique and varied as each one of us here today. In an age of distressing divisions between human beings it may seem counterintuitive to speak in favor of our uniqueness. But the fact remains, there is only one you and only one me who has ever been and will ever be. And wouldn't it be a shame to pass up your one opportunity to be that unique being, to choose the life that has chosen you, and share your genius with the world be it through a career, relationships, your interests, hobbies, and commitments, however great or small, grand or ordinary?

We ignore our genius and its guides at our own risk. As Thomas Moore notes, "Life may be simple when you avoid the daimon..., but it is also less passionate and meaningful."

And it is less you.
You, who will never be again.

Let us then not turn away, but welcome the life that chooses us so that when the river is ice, we can say, "Yes, what I have done is my life."

May it be so.

Amen and Blessed Be