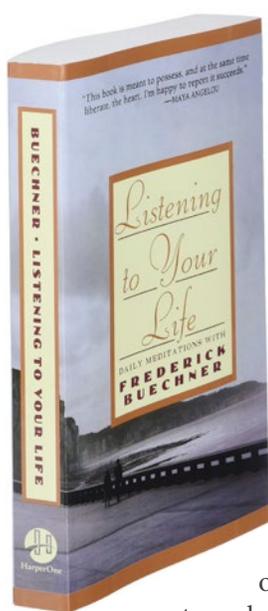


Listening To Your Life

Something really interesting happened to me a few weeks ago. Out of nowhere, an email came through from a most unexpected place. Of all people, a local Rabbi reached out to me asking if I would be willing to meet—definitely a first for me. I'm still not a hundred percent sure how he even got my email. He happens to have the same last name as a good friend of mine in the real estate business here so I just assumed there was a connection there. Regardless, I was definitely going to take this meeting. I make a point to keep myself open to such things and found myself super intrigued by this one. It's not every day that you get a cold call from a Rabbi, right?



Several years ago, when I was deep into my exploration of the mystics, I came across Frederick Buechner, a Christian mystic with a strong literary orientation—very much like my first spiritual teacher Eaknath Easwaran. Over a long life, Buechner has written a bunch of books and I happen to have stumbled across “Listening to Your Life,” a compilation piece featuring daily meditations from his vast and inspiring output. Buechner’s core theme seems to have been this: in this exceedingly difficult modern life, especially in terms of spirituality, one

of the best things you can do is simply to make a practice of listening very carefully to

your life. It's essentially a kind of mindfulness and the idea is that by paying close attention to the circumstances of your life and treating things, even small details, coincidences, and synchronicities as if they might actually mean something really important, you can dramatically improve the quality of your life. Here's how Buechner introduces the idea:

“If I were called upon to state in a few words the essence of everything I was trying to say both as a novelist and as a preacher, it would be something like this: Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.”

For several years now I have been experimenting with this practice and I'm convinced that Buechner is really on to something here. By listening to your life not only are you more focused in the moment, as with with mindfulness, but also and

more importantly your mindset and attitude evolves towards openness and curiosity, a massive step in the right direction when it comes to your psychological well-being. Daily life starts to come at you with that feeling of intensity and novelty that usually comes only when you travel someplace new and fun for vacation—you know, that curious feeling when time itself seems to slow down. What's more, by focusing your awareness in this way, something else really interesting and important starts to happen. Essentially, the practice creates a situation where there's simply less room in your consciousness for the things that tend to trip you up. So, by foreclosing the possibility for negative thought patterns, you naturally, inevitably start to feel better. Not surprisingly—I guess—when you start looking for meaning in the ordinary stuff of life, you are less likely to worry about the future, regret the past, compare yourself to others or feel things like anger, fear, anxiety and doubt. Sounds pretty nice, right?

Ok. Back to my story.

By the time the Rabbi's email came through I was already a deeply committed convert to Buechner's call to listen to your life. So, it was very easy for me to say “yes” to this particular meeting! The Rabbi and I corresponded a bit on email and agreed to meet in a few weeks time. As I got back into my usual flow and routine I kind of forgot all about it. But when the day rolled around and I noticed the meeting on my calendar I found myself energized by curiosity. I kept thinking:

“What in the world could this possibly be about?”

We met at a local coffee shop on Melrose—for those who know me, one of the 3 places I rotate through pretty much every day. It was a Thursday afternoon and the place was buzzing with that end-of-week energy. We were surrounded by youthful groups on all sides, embracing the summer and clearly enjoying that beautiful energy that the world offers to the young going into a weekend. I have to believe we looked terribly out of place. Certainly, the Rabbi did, dressed as he was in an Orthodox fashion. And if we didn't look out place, our conversation certainly was.

I must admit, when we sat down, I wasn't at all prepared for the conversation that followed. I've done a ton of these “first” meetings before and am very comfortable with the usual course where you dance around the surface of things. Yeah, you might occasionally touch on something serious or meaningful as you discuss things like work, mutual connections, background and biography, but by and large it's all very casual.

This conversation was different. It started off in the usual way but quickly evolved into something very profound. After the initial exchanges of courtesies and pleasantries, I tried to figure out how the Rabbi had even found me in the first place. Right way, it became clear to me that it wasn't from my friend with

the same last name as I had initially thought. I asked him the same question a few different ways but it was clear that he had either forgotten or didn't want to tell me for some reason. I dropped it and just let the conversation continue forward as I was more interested in figuring out why he wanted to talk with me.

After we got through some small talk, I reached back into my old management consulting toolkit and let a period of awkward silence set in. This, by the way, is one of the most effective ways to get to the heart of things in a conversation. There's something profound about the silence and the awkwardness. The more you can take, the better. Somehow it opens the channel for authenticity and genuine connection. I highly recommend trying this. Anyway, after a few moments, the Rabbi started asking me questions. I don't remember the exact words he used but these were the themes:

How do you go about this modern life—which is undeniably very economic—in a way that is consistent with morality and spirituality?

How do you engage with our economic world and the process of making money and not lose yourself to greed and selfishness?

How do you go about working to make money but keep a higher purpose in mind?

How can you create financial prosperity for your household and community at the same time?

Where do you find the motivation to take responsibility for the good of your community?

As the questions came, I thought to myself: "Wow, where is this coming from?"

We talked for 45 minutes straight without skipping a beat, sharing ideas, opinions and stories back and forth. What's so strange about this to me is that while these are all things I've done a ton of thinking about, they aren't things I normally talk or write about. I haven't shared too much along these lines publicly, if at all. Sure, I've written a few pieces here in Profit that reference things like the moral responsibility of the citizen and the relationship between spirituality and economics but that's about it. By and large the thinking I've done on this topic has all been very private. So, at the end of the meeting, I said: "I'm so curious Rabbi, what made you think I could even attempt to answer these questions." His answer floored me: "I could just tell."

Talk about an absolutely humbling, heartwarming and inspiring moment. I don't really know what the Rabbi's motivation was here but if it was to inspire me in a profound way, he certainly succeeded. For I walked away from that meeting on fire to double and triple down on whatever it is I'm doing with my work, my writing and my commitment to service.

Rabbi—if you are reading this—Thank you very much. □

