

## **On the Art of Listening by Jens Bodo Meier**

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Our listening is the gateway to a foreign world: to the world of another human being. There are different ways to listen to another person. I want to tell the story of a person who gradually developed his ability to listen.

I

Once upon a time there was a person who thought he knew everything about the world. He had gotten used to not listening properly when another person told him something. He had forgotten that there could be something in other people's stories that had the power to surprise him with something new. The foreign words rolled off his ears like drops of water on an umbrella. It appeared like a house whose doors and windows had been locked for a long time.

II

In the course of time, the one who thought he knew everything in the world felt lonely. Because other people don't enjoy telling him anything anymore. So one day he had the idea to open a shutter in the house of his listening a crack wide. And lo and behold: when someone told him something and he pricked up his ears, he discovered fine little surprises that he himself had not been aware of before. They fell like rays of light on his thoughts and awakened them to new life.

III

The man who once thought he knew everything in the world and who yesterday had opened a shutter in the house of his listening a crack wide, became silent and a little excited when he saw the light that other people had brought into his house with their stories dancing on his thoughts. This morning he opened all the shutters on the upper floor of his listening house and marveled at the view. He got brave, went down the stairs and unlocked the front door. He stepped into the door frame and addressed a person who was just passing by: "Please, tell me: what makes your life easy – and what makes it serious?" The other one answered indeed, and our man noticed how not only his thoughts began to shine, but also how his heart began to glow warmly. In the evening of this eventful day, the memory of a poem by the poet Novalis, which he had read a long time ago, rose in our human being:

Wenn nicht mehr Zahlen und Figuren  
Sind Schlüssel aller Kreaturen  
Wenn die, so singen oder küssen,  
Mehr als die Tiefgelehrten wissen,  
Wenn sich die Welt ins freie Leben

Und in die Welt wird zurück begeben,  
Wenn dann sich wieder Licht und Schatten  
Zu echter Klarheit werden gatten,  
Und man in Märchen und Gedichten  
Erkennt die wahren Weltgeschichten,  
Dann fliegt von Einem geheimen Wort  
Das ganze verkehrte Wesen fort.

If not more numbers and figures  
Are key to all creatures  
When they who sing or kiss,  
More than the wisest scholars know,  
When the world returns into the life of freedom  
And when the world returns into the world,  
When light and shade again  
Are united in true clarity,  
And one recognizes in fairy tales and poems  
The true stories of the world,  
Then by one secret word  
All the distorted beings are set to flight.

*Novalis*

IV

Today, on a new day of his discoveries, the man had already left his opinion of knowing everything in the world far behind. Air and light flowed through the open windows in the upper floor of his house of listening. Through the unlocked door on the ground floor people went in and out and brought their stories from many countries of the world to him. Our man accepted them as great gifts. This morning he awakened with the decision to go one step further than he had dared before. He packed a small bundle, left his safe house and went on a journey. When he met people he asked them – and they asked him: "Please tell me: what intentions do you carry hidden within you – and what challenges could you face when you start to realize them?" He wanted to hear the unsettling news, about which he had no finished thoughts – just as little as the person with whom he spoke. And again and again it happened that a magic word germinated within an encounter, which made the mysterious song that slumbers in all things and beings of this world ring out.

## Wünschelrute

Schläft ein Lied in allen Dingen,  
Die da träumen fort und fort,  
Und die Welt hebt an zu singen,  
Triffst Du nur das Zauberwort.

## Divining rod

There sleeps a song in all things,  
They dream away and away,  
And the world starts to sing,  
If you just find the magic word.

*Joseph von Eichendorff*