

# Deep Listening

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 3 January, 2021

A Contemporary Reflection by Jolyon Bromley

Christmas 2B

Jeremiah 31: 10-14; John 1: 1-5, 14, 16-18;  
Contemporary Reading: From Richard Powers - "*The Overstory*"

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

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Two days into the New Year we are still very conscious of beginnings; and what better text to hear at this point of time than the profound opening sentences of the Gospel of John.

*"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God."*

Matthew Fox calls this a description of the Cosmic Christ, the creative, transformative energy that is in every heart; that manifested supremely in Jesus of Nazareth; that is in the world today working in the inner life of feeling and thinking, changing attitudes and consciousness.

This text is very sacred to me, it uses poetic language to hint at profound truths and it underlies my spirituality and my understanding of the Christ.

The opening passage of Richard Powers' Pulitzer prize-winning novel, *The Overstory* carries echoes of the opening of the Gospel of John: "*First there was nothing. Then there was everything.*" He doesn't speculate on what lies between the then and the now. The woman listens to the trees communicating in words before words. The prelude ends with the pine tree saying: "*Listen. There's something you need to hear*".

My reflection today is designed more as a stimulus to your own reflection. So I begin by repeating Richard Powers' questions: "*at the beginning of the year, what is it that we need to hear?*"

What is it we need to do?

Firstly, as a whole people, as a species – what do we need to hear?

Secondly, what do I or you, personally, need to hear and do in our individual lives?

The novel as a whole tells us what Powers thinks we need to hear - through the detailed, varied lives of nine main characters. It becomes a great cry for the forests! A protest at the destruction of the complex, fragile ecological communities that are forests. It's about the fight to save the miraculous, thousand year old, giant redwoods in California and all forests everywhere.

We know the same issues here – the relentless pressure to log old growth forests, even after the massive destruction of the bushfires; “to provide jobs”, we’re told! But more importantly, to maintain the profit margins of corporations and the bonuses of executives.

Powers reminds us that without the forest cover the earth can’t breathe.

Later in the novel an even bigger picture emerges. A character doing a PhD in psychology, trying to understand what motivates people to risk their lives to protect the environment attempts to survey a young couple camping high up in giant redwood to prevent it falling prey to loggers. Their conversation is at the heart of the novel.

The young man in the tree explains: *as a society, we are looting the natural capital and hiding the costs. But the bill is coming, and we won’t be able to pay.*

The girl asks the student: *How long do you think we have? Do you believe human beings are using resources faster than the world can replace them?* The question seems so far beyond calculation it’s meaningless. Then, some small jam in him dislodges, and it’s like an unblinding. *It’s so simple, she says. So obvious. Exponential growth inside a finite system leads to collapse. But people don’t see it.*

We know society is fixated on the dollar signs, the stock market games, the profit forecasts, blind to the signs of collapse, denying the heating planet.

We need to tune into Nature. Matthew Fox calls it the primary scripture.

Indigenous people know this truth. The Aboriginal people of the Daly River region of the Northern Territory call it – *Dadirri*. The word, concept and spiritual practice is about tapping into that deep spring that is within us and within the natural world. It’s about deep listening! The concept of *Dadirri* is offered to us by the Miriam Rose Foundation – a not-for-profit organization working to empower indigenous youth through education, art and opportunity.

They write – *Many Australians understand that Aboriginal people have a special respect for Nature. The identity we have with the land is sacred and unique. Many people are beginning to understand this more. Also there are many Australians who appreciate that Aboriginal people have a very strong sense of community. All persons matter. All of us belong... Our culture is different. We are asking our fellow Australians to take time to know us, to be still and listen to us.*

When we penetrate to the core values of Aboriginal culture, the sense of oneness with the earth and the sense of all-inclusive community, we see the answers to the impending crises in Western culture which turns everything into commodities to be exploited. They offer us their spiritual gifts like *Dadirri*, deep, conscious, intentional listening to the spirit within.

We can call the spirit within the Christ within.

Listening is intentional, different from hearing. A lot of the time I have radio national on as I work around the house. I’m hearing snatches of conversations, tuning in and out. But if there is something I really want to hear I sit down to listen.

Meditation or prayer can be a way of inner listening, of being open to the spirit. There can be an inner knowing, a sensing something, that needs to be translated into words.

In Steiner education we say there are the basic soul capacities of thinking, feeling and willing which we are trying to develop, balance and harmonize. (We know what it's like when people live in the head but don't do much, or live too much in their feelings and become illogical; or are so busy doing things without thought of how they affect other people.)

Thinking, feeling and willing can be developed into higher means of perception. Thinking can be expanded to add a new dimension of Imagination; that is the capacity to see what isn't there at the moment but exists in potential. We can imagine a better world.

Our feeling life can be developed through artistic practice to create a faculty of Inspiration. Any creative activity becomes an exercise developing inspiration. Great works of art are spiritually inspired but even on an everyday level we can have little inspirations which are incredibly satisfying. Just moving a piece of furniture into a different position or hanging a painting where there was nothing before; or saying the right word to a person in need.

Inspirations come to us, often unbidden but in prayer or meditation we can invite them.

Then there is intuition – transformed will. In the scriptures we hear a lot of God's will. We pray: *Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven*. Willing is often used as a synonym for doing - but it's the inner impulse to do something. How often have we heard it said: *the government doesn't have the political will to do something*, like take action on climate change? Intuition is an inner knowing of what needs to be done.

Imagination, inspiration, intuition can all come to us as we need them, in deep listening, in meditation, connecting with the spirit, the Christ within.

When we face the awful realities of our present world, we see we are on a path to destruction; when we cut down the forests, we damage the lungs of the earth; when we burn fossil fuels we add to the greenhouse effect, we could go on about plastic in the oceans and the extinction of species tearing a hole in the delicate, interdependent web of life.

But our hope is in the transformative power of Christ within each one of us, changing attitudes showing the way forward. There are signs of green consciousness in governments and corporations.

Strangely enough, let me finish with Jeremiah, coming from a different time and context, predicting the defeat and destruction of his homeland - but in his imagination seeing the restoration. He brings God's words:

*I will turn their mourning into joy,*

*I will comfort them and give them gladness for sorrow.*

As we look to the year ahead – what is it that we need to hear?

What is it we need to do?