

Write to the Heart of Motherhood
connecting to our true voice in the middle of our messy lives

Week 2. THEME AND GUIDANCE



LISTENING AND VOICING

Greetings dear friends, and welcome to week 2!

I have already been moved to tears AND moved to giddy, ridiculous dance parties with my family – because of YOU. Because of each of you. In the last year and a half I've felt such passion about what this course could be, but I had no idea what would flow in once it began. Your stories have already brought up memories, longings, sighs of recognition, and a sense of homecoming. *THANK YOU*, for bringing such artfulness, fullness, realness, and rawness. I love both the ordinary and the extraordinary that you've shared. You are safe here, and your courage to bring yourselves forward is good for you, me, and all of us. I hope you continue to share as feels right – in silent listening and witnessing of each other, in the sounding of your hearts' wisdom as well as what might feel a little risky or awkward, and in the compassionate, real reflections you offer to one another.

Which brings us to our theme this week: LISTENING AND VOICING.

Our capacity to express ourselves with range and depth is dependent on its opposite: our capacity to listen and receive with our whole being. Our intelligence and skillfulness in how we settle, cohere our attention, get quiet (even in the midst of movement and noise) and listen for what most wants to be spoken and articulated, births both wellbeing and creative percolation. I

have this funny “problem” that whenever I *try* to write, reliably nothing comes, or nothing I am particularly moved by. But inevitably, if I sit down to meditate, after about 15 minutes, all kinds of poetic fragments start whispering in my inner ear, and I have to whisper back, “Shhhhh! I’m meditating! Can you wait just 20 more minutes, PLEASE?!?!” Haha!!

The “worst” is when I’m on meditation retreats, and my personality self gets quieter and quieter as the hours and days go on, and then the voices from the depths start flowing (sometimes it feels like my soul, sometimes it feels like the Earth herself, somehow...), and then I simply grab my phone between meditation periods, walk to a distance where I won’t disturb others, and then speak the lines I’m hearing in meditation into voice memos in my phone. I transcribe and re-work those later once I’m home, and some have been among my most mysteriously helpful poems when later I feel stuck or afraid.

I’m not saying we all need to go meditate all the time. It’s not for everyone, and we mamas have very spare free time as is. But the essential gesture that happens in meditation – of profound listening as a portal beyond conceptual knowing and into deep, intuitive knowing – is the essential gesture I want for us, for our lives, our creativity, our wellbeing, and our families. Personally, this gesture drops me below all the tricky, painful conversations I used to have with myself whenever I’d begin writing. Conversations that pivoted around fear of having nothing to say, the need to impress people (peers, teachers, potential readers, publishers), the need to sound smart, and the need to look good, or nowadays, “authentic.” (Side note, I adore true, spontaneous authenticity, but not the persona of authenticity that’s become common in some circles.)

My deepest desire to write always came from my soul, or perhaps a mystery I cannot even name, but I remember so often thrashing around in the barbed wire of my ego, trying desperately just to begin. Just to get some words out. Just getting snagged by all these ways I wanted writing to form something I could show others to make me seem and feel smart, desirable and lovable, and basically save me from my worst fears of being bad, rejected and alone.

I would often accidentally fall through the cracks of that whole dimension of isolation and struggle, into flow states where the writing felt like it came from a natural source in my depths. *This flipped everything on its head – this is what writing from the heart was all about – this finally scratched the itch.* It was like the process that I was using to pit myself against myself and prove how stupid or uncreative I was, BROKE OPEN into the very process that healed all that bullshit. How? Why?

I became obsessed with how to navigate from the first experience to the second - the first dimension of humanness, where I fought myself to no end, to the second, where I felt relaxed into something greater than my ordinary sense of self. I wondered: how come sometimes I torture myself through writing, and sometimes I liberate myself? The duality of the experiences was utterly vivid, but I could not figure out how to unlock access to some kind of power around which version of the writing experience I enacted. *Can you relate?*

This threshold between the first and second dimensions of writing I've described is where the essential gesture of meditation can make all the difference. And what is this gesture, again? It took me years and years of practicing meditation, but then also the psycho-spiritual death process of birthing my first son and being reborn a mama in all the wilderness of this terrain we mothers are sharing, before I could feel how critical – and how available – this gesture always is. It is the act of profound listening. You know this gesture deeply, we mamas all do: true, wide-open, wholehearted, full-bodied, not-knowing-what-the-fuck-is-next, free-falling listening.

Before, I was always trying to push some *thing* out of myself in words, before I'd even listened to what was actually inside me.

Before, I was too scared of the necessary *not knowing*, before actually, really *knowing* the thing that was mine to know.

Before, there was not enough time to wait... wait... wait... even if that meant 50 mornings of waiting, until the timid but true voice rose from being buried under all those layers.

Before, I just wanted an *object* I could give to others so they'd love me, more than I wanted to deeply know my own *subject*, my own self.

Before, no one ever told me, no one ever taught me, that I have to listen, receive, and fill, before I say, offer, and overflow.

Sometimes, in grace-filled moments, or for you advanced practitioners out there, the listening and the voicing happen in one fell swoop: we somehow feel plugged in, and the electricity simply begins to flow. I can sense that already in some of your shares in our Facebook community space. Hallelujah! Enjoy that! Say some thanks for that momentum, current, or even firehose of truth surging through you. Ahhhh, feels good to let your own heart pour forth, and just as good to receive such immense and courageous gifts, as the reader.

Sometimes, though, we just have to practice. We have to tease the process apart. We have to wait, and tune, and listen, and find the strength, surrender and trust to sit in the unknown a little longer. And boy, do I know... sometimes "sitting in the unknown" is relaxing and easy, and sometimes... *it is NOT*. Sometimes I'd rather do anything other than sit and *not bleeping know*. I'd rather hop online. I'd rather make more coffee. I'd rather take a shower. I'd rather clip my nails. Watch Game of Thrones. Sleep. Pop pimples on my face. Annnnnnyyyything, besides the uncomfortable feeling of waiting. The uncomfortable feeling that I might be just wasting time, instead of making something I can show for my efforts.

So – the solution is simple. We must become connoisseurs of listening. We must get really good at getting really curious. We must *start here, wholehearted*, again – now. We must become priestesses of the high spiritual art of full-bodied listening, which means, as a secret side-note, we must lean toward and into the raw sensations arising moment to moment in our body-

minds. Listening is an embodied art form – but all we have to do is feel and breathe and listen, and then feel and breathe and listen again.

I've made a noteworthy mistake in this teaching piece so far, but hopefully it will help illustrate my main point :) I dove right in to sharing without inviting us all in to some kind of centering, grounding, stopping-and-gear-shifting ritual together. So, now's the time. Now is, luckily, always the time. Let's pause together here, and practice what I've been preaching so far through a little movement, breath and a poem I wrote about a figure in the Buddhist tradition who was enlightened through listening, and became the One who Hears the Cries of the World, the Bodhisattva of Compassion.

So, if you'd be so kind as to first take a moment to let your body move and be filled with your breath – stretching to find length, through your arms, spine, and any other part of your body that desires to lengthen. Just reach yourself out into space in any way that feels good while taking a couple deep breaths. Listen for how you feel as you engage in movement and breath. Then, settle yourself into stillness in a position that feels to you both relaxed and alert. Soften your gaze, or close your eyes if you are not in motion. Take a couple full, deep breaths, and then bring your attention to the space and feeling of your heart. Breathe into and from your heart. Then, let your attention expand to include your entire body-mind, and even a little space beyond, so you become like an orb, breathing, feeling, and listening. Your heart is the center, the nucleus, but you are listening *as* the whole vehicle of YOU. Now, simply receive and feel...

AVALOKITESVARA

This poem is listening.

In that sense it is open.

Each word

is the surface veil

of a tunnel of listening
with no end or origin.

It receives
the things we think we hide:
the shine of awkward posture

when performing power,
the fervid care – too vulnerable
to share – hiding under small talk.

It hears the sighs
of your fifty trillion cells
living lucidly under your selfing,

and it absorbs your gossip also.
Give it the headlines of the day,
and the ache to fix it all. Give it

the story of your little you
and all the elaborate plans.
The kingdom and the ash.

Give the secret crisis
that pierces the center of all
us creatures here on earth,

these tenderized hearts
wise to the verity
of incipience and loss.

Say your full formal name

and expect no echo.

Say yes

to yourself

and listen

to the listening listening.

All right, thank you for joining me in that poem. Go ahead and gently deepen your breath and shift your body out of stillness when you're ready. I wanted to welcome this poem into our listening practice because it (or she, maybe?) offers the perspective that we don't have to effort alone – perhaps we can imagine or feel into a quality of compassionate listening that is always permeating the space around and within us. So, we can listen and feel, *and* we can offer ourselves to a more transcendent or immanent, perhaps even a maternal or Divine Maternal, quality of unconditionally loving listening, holding us and reality all the time. AND – for extra nuance and bonus points, we can listening to that Listening listening. And then, who knows what's possible! For Avalokitesvara (the figure in India who evolved into Kwan Yin in China, and Kanzeon in Japan) it was precisely this act (listening to the one who listens) that spurred her great awakening!

Perhaps we'll find the same. Perhaps our great awakening looks like: THIS. Laptop, coffee, desk (plus wholehearted listening). Breastfeeding, tired eyes, belly gurgling (plus profound listening). Cooking soup and daughter calls from college (plus listening). Out for a winter walk, flashback to most raw memories of birthing (listening, dear one, I'm here, listening). Tea date with friend, tears over abortion (together, listening, listening). We are living inside the open gates of wisdom and compassion at every moment, sensing our way to and from this Heart of Motherhood.

As we practice listening beyond what's conventional or known, toward something closer in and more real, we'll come to find our unique ways of expressing both our depths, as well as the wild, tender, and humorous textures along the surface of our lives. We don't have to get serious or heavy through listening, or only write the "deep stuff." On the contrary, our listening will open us up to a full range of life's feast – the hilarious, the absurd, the sexy, the awkward, the exploratory, the wise and the real. We will simply become *available*. Available for life's texture of the moment to arrive, through us.

And then, one of the coolest things I've found for myself through writing from deep listening, is that I actually get filled up by what is moving through me. Instead of feeling depleted from waiting, the deeper pieces that I have made time and space for to emerge, fuel me, massage me, transform me, and nourish me, as these mysteries pass through me into words. How amazing is that?! Do you know what I'm talking about? If so, awesome! If not, I'll bet you will soon, so let me know when you do... Because, THIS – being filled up by what we write as we write it, being opened and rearranged by what we discover through our listening, is how it can be sustainable for us as mothers to also be writers. We feed ourselves as we make our art.

I'll leave you with one more nugget I realized for myself a couple years ago about writing: I realized that when we write from our hearts, from courageous listening, the material that comes out is a form of life itself. The words from our true voice have an actual livingness about them. Your work, when culled from potent attention and listening, is a sentient being, in a subtle way. I realized I couldn't just sit down and write a book of poems in some linear way out of my mind. I had to live my way into my poems so they could come to life through my very body, with all the grit and grace of real life. If this capacity to actually birth living forms of art in the wake of birthing our children is not a sacred rite of being a mother-writer, I don't know what is.

I think this is why our writing often demands deep listening and by the same token often feels quite alive, almost as if it has a pulse of its own: *because we know what it is to give birth. We are the ones who have gone there, and we are different for it.* And whether your birthing was

agony, ecstasy, or a mixture of the two, whether you gave birth the way you wanted or the opposite of the way you wanted, whether it was 4 months ago or 40 years ago, and whether you never birthed but instead adopted, *your being knows how to shift and open to make space for new forms of life*. Our cells know how to listen and dance novelty into form. Our way of making art is visceral, even as it includes the emotional and the rational. We. Make. Life. (with some help from Nature and Spirit, of course...) So trust and let go into that deeper function and wise, old knowing coursing through you; listen down into that intuitive current that brings the formless into form, and speak to us from there, please. We're all longing to hear those gems.

I'll leave you with a quote I love from the late singer-songwriter, novelist, and poet, Leonard Cohen, which captures something of what I'm trying to point to:

"Poetry is the evidence of life. If your life is burning well, poetry is the ash."

May you and your lives always burn well, listen deeply, and share bravely.