



At its core this memoir is a look at being willing to divest ourselves of judgement, prejudice, and pettiness to uncover a heart that longs to be seen. These vignettes, essays and poems are a testimonial to the power inherent in relinquishing a modicum of control of what most of us so steadfastly want to hold onto---our self-image.

Naked Listening: The Wisdom of Transparency

by Alan Hundley

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NAKED LISTENING

The Wisdom of Transparency

An abstract, textured artwork featuring a central figure composed of various colors like pink, orange, and red, surrounded by a chaotic mix of purple, blue, green, and yellow strokes. The overall effect is one of intense, layered energy.

ALAN HUNDLEY

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Introduction

*When you talk you are only repeating something
you already know. But if you listen,
you may hear something new.*

—Dalai Lama

We all have stories to tell, stories that shape us and make sense of our lives.

Many of us hunger for personal narratives and search for intimacy through books, movies and stories told by others. Often though, we are uncertain as to how much we can bare our own soul and share our truth. While writing this collection of personal stories, poems, and essays I have noted how much more willing I am to reveal myself in writing as opposed to speaking.

To what degree can we be honest and risk the judgments and projections of others? To what degree can we be honest with ourselves? What does it mean to be authentic and what is the value of transparency?

For over forty years I worked as a massage therapist and somatic educator, and taught yoga, tai chi, improvisational movement, and dance. During a massage, the communication is primarily by way of underlying sensory/motor nervous systems through the structure of skin, muscles, connective tissue, and internal organs. Clients are usually naked or nearly naked, although well draped.

In a massage session, a relay of information is taking place for a certain kind of learning which goes beyond words. When giving a massage, I feel that I am touching a person

where they *live* rather than engaging with them about who they think they are. For my clients, their story is in their physical structure. Through a process of somatic exploration, the narratives are revealed, though they may never be spoken, and long-standing patterns can be released. There always is a certain ineffable honesty that pervades the experience for both giver and recipient. For the duration of the session we are both *listening* at a level below conscious thought. This sense of deep listening is what drew me to explore massage as a profession.

Naked Listening implies to me a willingness to be touched, especially when we are alone and the roles that we have adopted do not apply, as in times of extreme discomfort, tragedy or distress. When the conditioning our minds have endured are stripped of their meaning and all that is left is just this one moment, this and nothing else, *then*, who are we?

Sometimes divesting ourselves of judgement, prejudice, hatred, and pettiness can uncover a heart that longs to be seen and heard. This type of nakedness can be more revealing and the exposure more difficult than being seen without clothes. Someone many years ago commented: "If all of our world leaders could just take off their clothes and get into a big hot tub together, many of our political problems could be solved." While this would be an interesting experiment, the chances of it happening or producing the desired result are slim. However, I do believe that to have a true democracy, it is necessary to listen to each other. And *naked listening* relies on relinquishing a modicum of control and identity with external biases and reactivity.

This book, *Naked Listening*, is not meant to be solely autobiographical. These events are not exactly memoirs. The title seems both literally and metaphorically appropriate and the term *vignettes* describes these stories best: *Impressionistic snapshots of scenes collected from life experience*.

My intention is not simply to report an experience from my past, but to find some insight within that experience, some unexpected *jewel* that emerges. As I attempt to describe an event, I want to be surprised by a revelation not considered before and see how that insight helped shape my life and how that insight continues its impact today.

I have been profoundly moved by stories, read, listened to, and watched. I especially like stories that can touch my heart, make me cry, make me laugh out loud, and still elicit a poignant echo of truth and beauty revealing a transparency of soul.

Years ago, my wife and I were participating in a seminar for personal growth called The Forum©. One of the exercises was to write down your life story, or at least as much as you could recall, in a relatively short period of time.

While writing, I fastidiously came up with the highlights of events and people which I determined were significant. A collection of wins and losses, broken dreams, difficulties with parents, authority figures, roles I had adopted, etc. Later we were to read our “story” to another person and then another, and another, until basically, we became bored with the telling. What an effective exercise to

elucidate how we can get attached to our story, our *history*, and how it becomes our identity.

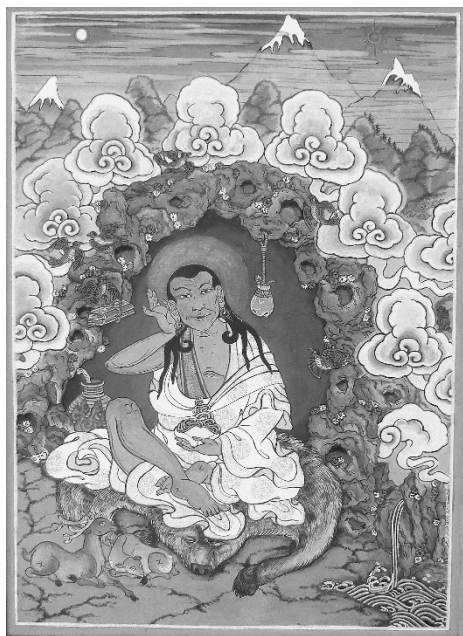
The now classic movie, *Airplane*, released in 1980 was a spoof on all the disaster movies that were spawned in the 1970s. One of the movie's main characters, Ted Striker, a commander in an air force squadron where he was responsible for the death of a comrade, George Zip, is recovering from what would now be referred to as post-traumatic stress syndrome.

In the airplane, he is telling his story to a sweet little old lady who happens to be seated next to him. As the story proceeds we see the lady feigning interest. Then we see her suppressing disinterest. In final desperation to be rid of this man with his self-indulgent narcissistic behavior, she hangs herself. Totally oblivious, Ted just keeps rattling on. Certainly dark humor, but like a lot of satire it strikes a familiar chord. We have all been that little old lady, wanting to lend an ear but at times not having the patience to endure the endless banter of narcissism, self-absorption and disregard for the listener.

At one of the breakout sessions in the Forum experience, there was a young man who had contracted the AIDS virus. He said something that has always stayed with me. "I don't want to die with songs still inside me." That sentiment is part of my motivation: I do not want to die with these stories still inside me.

We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak.

--Epictetus, first century Greek Philosopher



Milarepa, 11th Century Tibetan Yogi

On the Wisdom of Transparency

There is no greater act than putting yourself before another. Not before another as coming first, but rather as in opening yourself before another, exposing your essence before another. Only in being authentic can real kinship be known and real kindness be released.

-Mark Nepo, *The Book of Awakening*

Writing these stories has been an exercise in revealing what psychologist Carl Jung refers to as *our shadow*, aspects of our past that may elicit a sense of shame or embarrassment that we would rather keep hidden. My intention has been to be open and transparent about some

of the internal dramas that I have experienced in my life. I have been influenced by reading the memoirs of writers who have been willing to write candidly about their lives. This is not about hanging out dirty laundry. Hopefully, sharing my personal stories will shed light on transparency as it pertains to self-expression and inquiry.

The term transparency seems to be bandied about quite a lot lately. On one end of the spectrum, Donald Trump Jr. expressed his desire to be “fully transparent” in his remarks to the press regarding his dealings with Russian diplomats in uncovering any “dirt” on Hillary Clinton during the 2016 presidential election. Saying he’s being transparent and has nothing to hide is perhaps not the whole story. The jury, if there will ever be one, may still be out on that one.

On the other end of the spectrum is a clever play on the word as the title of a television series called *Transparent*, which is about an aging father who comes out to his adult children as transgendered. And recently I saw a cartoon depicting two fierce lions chasing a small rabbit soon to be lunch. One lion is saying to the other, “The system’s not perfect, but by God, it’s transparent.”

Transparency is a central theme in another television series called *The Crown*, a reenactment of the early years of the reign of Queen Elizabeth II. One of the episodes recounts the coronation ceremony of twenty-six-year-old Elizabeth which was broadcast on television, an historical first that was frowned upon by some of the old guard at Buckingham Palace, including Prime Minister Winston Churchill. This sacred rite was considered too private to be displayed before the commoners in such a fashion.

Elizabeth's uncle, Edward VIII, who had famously abdicated the throne to his younger brother, Elizabeth's father, was watching the televised ceremony. As she was anointed with holy oil, symbolizing her direct connection with the Divine, the live television coverage of this all-too-sacred moment was interrupted. When the transmission dropped to a still shot, someone in the room asked, "Why all the smoke and mirrors?" The revealing answer of the former king: "Who wants transparency when you can have magic?"

Who indeed? Perhaps the magic of royal monarchies steeped in the splendor of pomp and secret ceremony has historically served to bolster spirits and create an awed sense of belonging to something greater. In Hans Christian Andersen's timeless fable, *The Emperor's New Clothes*, we see a reversal of the story, although it is the same idea. The *façade* is transparent, but no one wants to admit this for fear of being exposed either as a fool or unfit for office. It takes the guileless transparency of a child (or a populace willing to resist) to speak up and dispel the charade. This controlled delusion has played out in dictatorships and autocracies where fear of reprisal clouds the facilities of clear perception. That same charade of opaqueness and diversion from the transparency of truth has found its way into the American political system as well. Who wants transparency when you can have fantasy?

Several memoirs and personal histories of contemporary personalities such as Billy Crystal's *Still Foolin' Em*, Tina Fey's *Bossy Pants*, and Amy Poehler's *Yes, Please* are all funny, poignant, irreverent perhaps to the point of being vulgar, but all the while entertaining. Celebrities live in a fish bowl and are always up for scrutiny. To a certain

extent, transparency is a way of life for people in show business. Writing a revealing memoir is an opportunity to capitalize on that stardom and tell it as they wish. *Let's Pretend This Never Happened*, the first book by Jenny Lawson, not as famous but equally compelling, is hilarious. Jenny is completely transparent, pulls no punches and breaks all the rules of propriety and "good taste" in sharing her very unconventional life. Her sequel, *Furiously Happy*, also a wild romp, goes even deeper into her challenges with mental instability, and felt a little edgy at times.

Just Like Someone Without Mental Illness, Only More So, by Mark Vonnegut (Kurt Vonnegut's son), *My Age of Anxiety: Fear, Hope, Dread, and the Search for Peace of Mind*, by Scott Stossel, and *On Edge: A Journey Through Anxiety*, by Andrea Petersen all disclose very personal issues with mental illness, cogency and transparency. The research of Stossel and Petersen, both journalists, about anxiety and depression is astounding. Reading their stories was inspirational and transforming. Much of the sharing of my own personal history was prompted by their willingness to share openly about their process in dealing with anxiety and depression.

What does it mean to be transparent? Is it to be an open book, constantly wearing your heart on your sleeve? Does being transparent imply being colorless, without character or substance?

During the 1960s and early '70s young people disillusioned with their parents' ideology started creating their own, living in communes and basking in the freedom of exposure. Getting naked and "free love" were in vogue and became new anthems for the boomer generation.

Women burned their bras and nudist colonies and nude beaches proliferated.

I recall a friend telling me stories about living in a house with several other young people during the '60s. Openness, truthfulness, and having no secrets were the basic household tenets. One day a young man came down the stairs and announced that he had just masturbated. Others in the house decided to take down the bed room and bathroom doors, stating that privacy was a "bourgeoise concept" that no longer had a place in their lives.

Hollywood picked up on the idea of being honest about infidelity in marriage and spawned movies such as *Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice*. There was a movie in the '90s called *Ice Storm* about swinging couples in the '70s who would gather for the express purpose of having sex with another's spouse.

Group therapy and AA meetings were places where participants could spill their guts and release pent up emotions. It was now okay to be real, authentic, and genuine and tell their stories with no artifice. Others like to get naked and share their intimate stories in hot tubs and hot spring resorts that offer the option of nudity. Encounter groups exist for a reason. A shadowy past sometimes wants to be lifted into the light.

These examples could possibly be indications of revealing oneself both physically and emotionally. The question I am posing to myself is more about when being transparent is the wise option. When and under what circumstances does being transparent offer an opportunity to transform our shadows by bringing light to shame and vanquish the

isolation that often results in the inability to speak the truth clearly about one's life?

The phenomena of social media have opened new avenues to share with others the events and stories of our lives. But how much of this is simply bolstering how we want to be seen without allowing our true selves to show through? The biblical adage, "don't throw pearls before swine" comes to mind when I witness those who lack discriminating awareness about what is appropriate to reveal and when it is wise to dispense information.

Even with all the ways modern life offers us to be more open, many have reserved the option to keep secret some of their most embarrassing moments and certainly their private parts, although social media can become another peep show. Many things can be exposed that we would not want even our closest friends to see or know. How can we trust that shared information will never be used against us in some way? Is transparency about trying to dig into our past and tell all, or is it simply the willingness to have open dialogue about feelings that could be hiding the better parts of our nature?

Most of my early life I was busy building a wall around anything I felt might make me look vulnerable or weak. I did this so well that I did not have any sense of who or what I was. I filled my time with fantasies of how I wanted to appear to others and myself. Why would I want reality when I could have fantasy? *Why have transparency when you can have magic?* Stepping out from behind that wall has not been easy. Dying and being reborn is not easy. Life is not easy. In these stories, I have not revealed too many deep dark secrets, nor have I been overly outrageous in my

telling, but nonetheless I have tried to express myself openly and without any sense of shame or embarrassment. The dramas that have played out could have been much worse, the joys could have been more, but as the third patriarch of Zen, Hsin Hsin Ming, once said, "The Great Way is not difficult for those who have no preferences."

Part V - Relationship

Blackberries and Coming of Age in Kentucky

The summer of 2016, I rode a bicycle from Vancouver, British Columbia in Canada, to Portland, Oregon with my wife Kathleen and five other stalwart cyclists down the back roads and rails to trails that traverse the coast of Washington State. The trip covered 350 miles and it took nine days to complete which included a two-night stay in Seattle.

To my delight it was blackberry season in the Northwest. If I kept a keen eye open, I could spot the brambles that held the ripe berries, free and ready to be picked and enjoyed. Stopping to stuff my mouth with blackberries, taking a little rest and replenishing my blood sugar, became a daily ritual. If I'd had room for a bumper sticker it would have read, "I brake for blackberries."

Any seasoned blackberry picker knows that the mature and sweetest berries come off into your hand effortlessly with just the slightest pull. If it resists at all, it will most likely be sour. Leave it for the next picker.

Growing up in a farming region of Kentucky, I learned this principle applies to most any fruit or vegetable. When it's mature and ready to be consumed, it practically falls into your hand.

The plentitude of blackberries reminded me of a hot summer day when the blackberries were ripe near the small rural town where I grew up. I was around 12 years old.

My mother had sent my two older brothers and me out to pick some berries which she would freeze or can or make

into a cobbler. Of course, we would eat our fill while trying to save some of the choicest berries to fill our buckets, though more often than not, the choicest berries usually ended up in our bellies.

My eldest brother Doug had his driver's license by then, so the three of us took the '55 Chevy to a nearby field full of berries ready to be picked.

Even though it was hot as blazes, we needed to wear long sleeved shirts to provide some modicum of protection from the briars. It always seemed like the best and juiciest berries were being guarded by an entanglement of thorny branches. Just as a bee keeper expects to be stung a few times, it was a given that you would return home stained with blackberry juice on your hands and mouth, mixed with a few scratches beaded up with blood.

It was a small price to pay.

I recalled, on that hot summer day in the early 1960s, going to the car for a little rest and deciding to turn on the car radio.

In those days you could listen to the radio without turning the key or turning on the engine.

The smell of summer was in the air.

About the only type of music I had heard up to that point in life were hymns from the Baptist church or the occasional ballad from the likes of Perry Como or Andy Williams which my parents enjoyed, along with Sing Along with Mitch and Lawrence Welk. A weekly television ritual.

But the song that came out of the radio that day was distinctly different in two ways. It was sultry and sexy, and it spoke to something that was just beginning to stir inside me.

The song was *He'll Have to Go*, written by Joe Allison, but made popular by country singer-songwriter Jim Reeves.

Although I wasn't fully conscious of it at the time, I was being introduced to a mixture of poetry, rhythm and melody which combined to convey a specific sentiment, and that sentiment was beginning to inform me of desire, heartache, longing and betrayal.

In a few short lines, an entire scene unfolded in my young mind of a woman in a honky-tonk bar, probably conflicted and confused about her life and the choices she's making. She receives a call from a man she's been in love with at some point in her life-- perhaps it's her husband. He's very clear about *his* personal motives and is letting her know, in no uncertain terms, he wants her back.

These sentiments are a well-worn theme in Country Music and it could be said that a majority of the songs bear some resemblance to what was being expressed in this song. Not to disparage the genre, but many of the Country Music songs I hear seem to be saying, "If you leave me, won't you please take me with you."

But what I heard that blackberry summer was new information for me. I sensed that someday soon, I would be in the mix of romantic entanglement and it would be just as prickly as those blackberry brambles. I didn't know it then, but hearts would be broken and at times it would be my heart that bore the scars.

I would learn that some of the choicest fruit was way out of my reach and would bring only heartache.

I would learn to be discerning and selective in my choices and still I would get stuck. Looking back now, I wouldn't change any of it.

At the ripe age of thirty-two, I met a thirty-year-old woman named Kathleen who told me on our second date that her eggs were getting old. Her direct approach and lack of any of the sentimentality of Country Music spoke to me and we plucked each other from the vine, and for better or for worse, fell into each other's arms effortlessly.



At its core this memoir is a look at being willing to divest ourselves of judgement, prejudice, and pettiness to uncover a heart that longs to be seen. These vignettes, essays and poems are a testimonial to the power inherent in relinquishing a modicum of control of what most of us so steadfastly want to hold onto---our self-image.

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